THE VICAR RIDES OUT!

FORTEAN TV REVISITED

I WAS A TEENAGE ALIEN STORIES OF THE STAR CHILDREN

THE NEW NOSTRADAMUS MORE PROPHECIES OF DOOM!

COSMIC DEBRIS ROSWELL FRAGMENTS ANALYSED

THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST NEWS

JOHNNIE RAY STALKER • GNOME ISLAND • TORTOISE TERMINATOR • STONEHENGE SURPRISE

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

WWW.FORTEANTIMES.COM

ForteanTimes

FT449
OCTOBER 2024
£5.25

FOLKLORE RISING

AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE BRITISH RITUAL YEAR

FOLK HORROR ON FILM

TRANSLATING STARVE ACRE FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

A FEAST OF FOLKLORE

BRITAIN'S WEIRDEST CULINARY TALES AND TRADITIONS

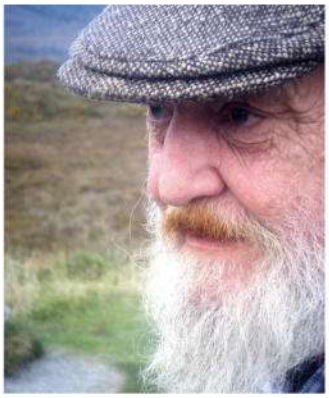
© House Starve Acre Limited, Acre Film LLC, British Broadcasting Corporation and The British Film Institute 2024

CONTENTS

BEN EDGE

28 *Folklore Rising: the British ritual year in paintings*

44 *Fortean TV Revisited*



JON DOWNES

24 *Raising a pint to Doc Shiels*

JAMES POOTS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

10 *Gnome Island*

53 *Mary Anning's Sea Dragon*

CHRIS HARRIS ©HOUSE STARVE ACRE LTD

38 *Starve Acre: folk horror from page to screen*

FORTEAN TIMES 449

Why fortean?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE 69

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: demonic faces, super-late library books, French Excalibur stolen and more...

11 THE CONSPIRASPHERE
14 SCIENCE
16 GHOSTWATCH
20 ALIEN ZOO
23 MYTHCONCEPTIONS
26 THE UFO FILES

FEATURES

28 COVER STORY
FOLKLORE RISING

BEN EDGE has travelled the length and breadth of Britain painting the weird and wonderful folk customs alive in communities all over the country. Here he shares a strange Devon tradition and speaks to FT about the redemptive potential of folklore in modern life.

34 A FEAST OF FOLKLORE

In an extract from his new book about British food folklore, **BEN GAZUR** examines the weirdest culinary traditions, rituals, and tales cooked up across the centuries.

38 HARE TODAY

Andrew Michael Hurley's 2019 novel *Starve Acre* was widely acclaimed, and a new film adaptation by Daniel Kokotajlo has lost none of the book's potency. **BOB FISCHER** meets both men to discuss hares, witchcraft and the influence of Nigel Kneale.

44 FORTEAN TV REVISITED, PART TWO

In 1997, viewers were treated to a television version of FT in which Rev Lionel Fanthorpe presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he wraps up the first series of *Fortean TV*...

SERIES

70 PECULIAR POSTCARDS

Serene Nord, the Diving Venus **JAN BONDESON**

FORUM

53 Mary Anning and the Sea Dragon **MATT SALUSBURY**

54 Are the best ufologists... ufologists? **NEIL NIXON**

REGULARS

02 EDITORIAL
57 REVIEWS
63 LETTERS
69 READER INFO
71 PHENOMENOMIX
72 STRANGE DEATHS

FortеanTimes

EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
drsutton@forteantimes.com

FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (ft-bobrickard@mail.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)

NEWS EDITOR
IAN SIMMONS (simmons@forteantimes.com)

ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN (etienne@forteantimes.com)

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
DAVID V BARRETT (dvbarrett@forteantimes.com)

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
ABIGAIL MASON

RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON

PRODUCTION MANAGER
LEE BOYMAN (lee.boyman@metropolis.co.uk)

ADVERTISING
JAMES KELLOCK (james.kellock@metropolis.co.uk)

FT ON THE INTERNET

www.forteantimes.com
www.facebook.com/forteantimes
Twitter/X: @forteantimes

FORTEAN TIMES is produced for Diamond Publishing Limited, a member of the Metropolis Group, by **WILD TALENTS LTD.** Postal address: Fortean Times, PO BOX 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

UK DD 6 Issues: £27.95 / 1 Year 13 Issues: £55.95
EUR/USA & CANADA 1 Year 13 Issues: £66.95
Rest of World 1 Year 13 Issues: £75.95

TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS, RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTION OR REPORT PROBLEMS:

hello@metropolis.co.uk / +44 (0) 208 752 8195

LICENSING & SYNDICATION

FORTEAN TIMES is available for international licensing and Syndication
Managing Director
David Saunders TEL: +44 (0) 208 752 8195
david.saunders@metropolis.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED IN UK, IRELAND AND WORLDWIDE

by 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6QA
0330 390 6464 **Email: Hello@Marketforce.co.uk**

diamondpublishing

PUBLISHED BY DIAMOND PUBLISHING LIMITED. A MEMBER OF THE METROPOLIS GROUP.

Fortean Times (ISSN 0308-5899, PE 23226) is published monthly with an extra issue in August by Diamond Publishing, 4th Floor, Harmsworth House, 13–15 Bouverie Street, London EC4Y 8DP, United Kingdom. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. **POSTMASTER**: Send address changes to Fortean Times, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

© Diamond Publishing Limited: AUGUST 2024

COVER PAINTING
BEN EDGE
INSET OF LIONEL FANTHORPE
ALEX HOWE/ETIENNE GILFILLAN

PRINTED BY PRECISION COLOUR PRINTING

EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

BEN EDGE

A FEAST OF FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

As you' ll see, a folkloric theme runs through this issue. In our cover story, artist Ben Edge gives us a glimpse into his studio and shares one of the stories from his new book, *Folklore Rising*, which chronicles in words, paintings and photographs his travels around Britain to record the wealth of folk customs and curious traditions kept alive and celebrated each year by local communities up and down the land. For Ben, it was a life-changing journey, and we are delighted to be able to present some of his wonderful work and to enjoy a chat about the transformative powers of folk customs in the modern world.

Ben Gazur, meanwhile, turns his attention to the many curious beliefs and traditions around British food, as collected in his new book, *A Feast of Folklore*. Here, Ben serves up a small selection of appetisers and amuse-bouches highlighting the wide variety of folk beliefs and customs that have attached themselves to everything from beans to beer over the centuries (more bean-based forteana in Simon Young's column this month: they were reputedly the only food that the Green Children of Woolpit would eat).

We turn from fertile fields to a darker landscape with the new British folk horror film *Starve Acre*, in which Andrew Michael Hurley's acclaimed novel gets a big screen adaptation helmed by director Daniel Kokotajlo and starring Matt Smith and Morfydd Clark. Our resident Haunted Generation correspondent Bob Fischer tries to get beyond his fascination for 1970s corduroy jackets and dig deeper into the film's folkloric motifs in a conversation with Andrew and Daniel about the seemingly unstoppable rise of folk horror, its literary and cinematic roots and why it continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Elsewhere in this issue, we celebrate a pair of legendary fortean figures: Ryan Shirlow concludes his rewatch of the first series of *Fortean TV* and marvels at Rev Lionel Fanthorpe's easy and open-minded way with the weird (a far cry from the doctrinaire positions espoused by many today); and on a sadder note we note the passing of artist and magician Tony 'Doc' Shiels, the fabled 'Wizard of the West', raiser of monsters (from Morgawr to Nessie) and much-loved presence in the pages of FT and at UnConventions over the years. His biographer Rupert White helps us raise a glass to Doc, and promises us a longer profile of the great man in a future issue. All this plus the usual cornucopia of curiosities and more weirdness than you can shake a morris dancer's stick at!

USPS CONFERENCE

The Unitarian Society for Psychical Studies is holding its *Exploring the Unknown* conference in Warwick on 28 September. Forteans in the area may be interested in attending, especially as speakers include regular FT contributors Alan Murdie, Rob Gandy and Dr Mark Fox. The conference takes place from 10am to 4pm at Warwick Unitarian Chapel, 31 High Street, Warwick, CV34 4AX. Tickets are £15, payable in cash on the door, and futher details are available from infousps@yahoo.co. uk.

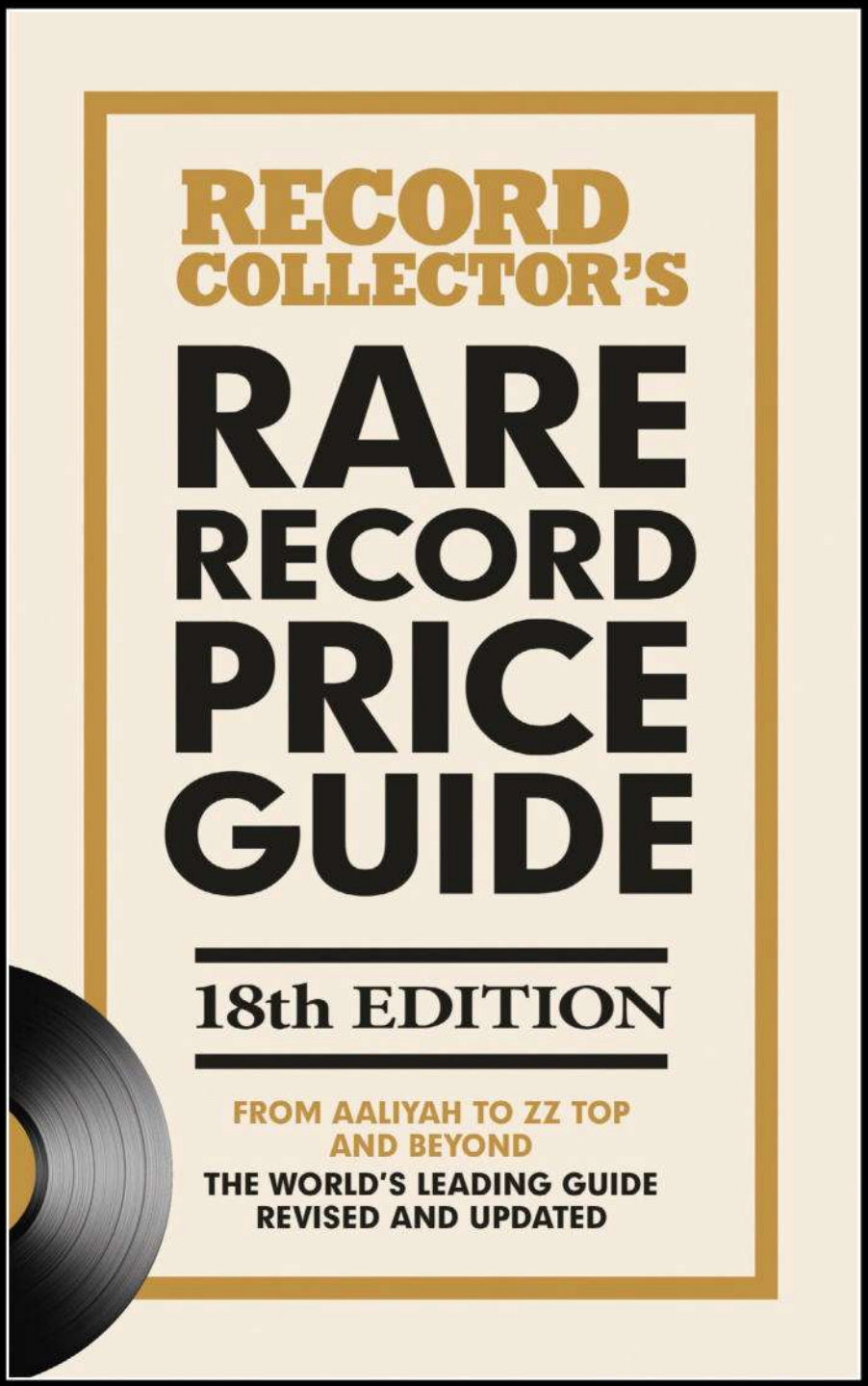
ERRATA

FT445:42: Paul Sieveking's 'Tales of the New Millennium' contained a classic howler concerning a young woman with liver problems who changed blood group following treatment. Alan R MacKenzie observed drily: "I suspect I was more amused than liver transplant patient Demi-Lee Brennan to discover she had been treated by a 'pædiatric herpetologist' rather than a more conventional hepatologist." Paula Dempsey noted helpfully that "a 'pædiatric herpetologist' would study young reptiles and amphibians."

PRE-ORDER TODAY!

NEW EDITION – EXCLUSIVE OFFER

ORDER NOW AND GET IT A MONTH BEFORE ANYONE ELSE



It's the most wonderful time of the year... Revised and updated, our sister publication *Record Collector's* **BRAND NEW 18th edition** of their legendary guide to collectable music is in the shops this October. Also available **exclusively** is the beautiful limited hardback edition signed by its new editor, longtime *RC* contributor, author and DJ Daryl Easlea. ***The Rare Record Price Guide 2026*** is a voice of reason in the often excitable, hectic world of collecting.

Softback: ~~£35.00~~ **£31.50**
Hardback: ~~£50.00~~ **£45.00**

shop.recordcollectormag.com/rcbook
subscriptions@metropolis.co.uk

On Sale Date: 17 October 2024
Pre-orders Dispatch: Mid- September 2024

SCAN ME

A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

PECULIAR PERSECUTIONS

A 60-year stalking case and other odd obsessions

CAVENDISH PRESS (MANCHESTER) LTD

THE LONGEST STALK

In 1964, 15-year-old Kenneth Furnival, from Runcorn in Cheshire, had his bus ticket checked by conductor John Ray, then aged 18. This encounter triggered a lifelong obsession in Furnival, who came to believe that Ray was really the 1950s pop star Johnnie Ray, whom he slightly resembled. It started with Furnival tracking down Ray's home address and sending him notes on multicoloured paper, calling him "Johnnie Ray", complimenting him on his "blonde hair and blue eyes", and asking for signed pictures of him dressed in a blue pullover. Ray never responded in any way, but this did not deter Furnival. His obsession continued as they grew older, leading to him follow Ray, secretly, taking pictures of him and his family, even following them on trips to the seaside, all the while sending him an "avalanche" of love letters and unwanted gifts, including Johnnie Ray CDs and DVDs.

For much of the time, Ray had no idea who Furnival was, what he looked like, or how he had become obsessed with him. He collected his letters, though, and tried to report him to police, who dismissed Furnival as "harmless", and in 1979 went as far as taking out a court order against Furnival, which Furnival ignored, resulting in a jail sentence. Furnival was not, however, remotely deterred by this and continued with his obsessive behaviour as soon as he was released. During all this time, the Rays would not let their sons play outside in case Furnival targeted them, moved house several times and even changed their surname, in an attempt to shake him off, but to no avail, Furnival always caught up and continued to send things, never wavering in his misguided devotion.

LEFT: Kenneth Furnival, who stalked John Ray for 50 years, convinced the Runcorn bus conductor was in fact the 1950s US pop star Johnnie Ray.

"Money is no good to me unless I can buy photos of you, John Ray"

Eventually he sent Ray a Christmas card containing a message saying "In 2023, I will burn £100, in 2024, I will burn £200, in 2025, I will burn £300, and stick it down your letterbox until it gets to £1,000. Money is no good to me unless I can buy photos of you, John Ray," and signed "Kenneth Furnival, the man who knew too much". This led to police searching Furnival's home as they feared he was planning an arson attack. They found a framed picture of Ray on Furnival's wall, taken covertly 35 years before, and this led to a prosecution for stalking, another jail sentence for Furnival, and an indefinite restraining order preventing him contacting the Rays, 60 years after he first conceived of his passion for John Ray.

Mrs Ray said "This man seemed to know everything. We still did not know who he was, only his name, not who or what he was. I could have passed the time of day with him and not even known. My children were never out of my sight for much longer than they should have been. They were not able to go to the park unless I could go too. They had little freedom to grow. It became a way of life." Danielle Reece-Greenhalgh, one of the lawyers involved in the case, said, "Harassment persisting for over 50 years is almost unheard of and the police's inaction perhaps reflects archaic attitudes about how stalking behaviours manifest and who 'typical' offenders and victims of harassment and stalking might be." *D.Telegraph, 1 Aug 2024.*

SCHRODINGER'S TWINS

A complex case that started in the family court at the Royal Courts of Justice in London in May involves a dispute between a couple who married in 2019 but separated in 2020. The ex-husband maintains that his wife was pregnant when they separated, giving birth to twin boys in February 2021, and he is taking her to court to be allowed to have contact with them. The wife, though, asserts that this is not true, that she was never pregnant, and that the court case is an attempt by her ex-husband to continue the "coercive and controlling behaviour" he showed during their marriage. The General Register Office can find no trace of any births registered in either parent's name between October 2020 and March 2021, and the wife's ex-GP gave evidence that she had never seen any evidence of pregnancy, despite seeing her throughout the period she was allegedly pregnant. However, the woman's psychotherapist gave evidence that the woman had visited her at home in February this year

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Long-overdue library books returned at last

PAGE 8

SWORD NOT IN THE STONE

French Excalibur is pinched from its perch

PAGE 15

COSMIC DEBRIS

Alleged Roswell fragments under the microscope

PAGE 26

accompanied by a toddler who called her "Mummy". In court, the wife also admitted telling her former partner that she was pregnant, sending him scans of the babies and talking about giving birth, but she said she was lying, and the scans were forged. One of the wife's friends, though, testified that she had told him, seven months after the alleged birth, "I will be 100 per cent honest with you," going on to say that she had given birth and that the children were with their uncle. Family barrister Lucy Reed KC said it was "extremely challenging" for the family court to sift reality from fiction as they do not carry out independent investigations, and Lady Arbuthnot, the presiding judge, said that as the couple were both representing themselves it was harder to explore facts than it would have been if lawyers were involved. Arbuthnot concluded that there was "strong evidence" there was a pregnancy and "some evidence" that at least one child was born, probably in a private hospital where it would have been possible to evade registration, but she could not be certain and could not say where any child is now. There will be another hearing "in due course" to determine the next steps. *BBC News, 1 Aug 2024.*

LEFT FOR DEAD?

In late July, Pandurang Gawkar, a cow herder in the Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra, western India, was taking his cattle to graze in the forest when he heard "a woman screaming loudly". Investigating, he found Lalita Kayi, 50, chained to a tree, emaciated and apparently near death. "The sound was coming from the forest on the side of the mountain. When I went there, I saw that one of her legs was tied to a tree. She was screaming like an animal. I called other villagers and the local police," said Gawkar. Police sawed through the chain and took Kayi to hospital for treatment. They found a passport on her, revealing she was an American citizen, along with an Indian ID card giving her home address in Tamil Nadu. She also had a mobile phone, a tablet and 31,000 rupees (£290) with her. Initially unable to speak, Kayi, who seemed only able to understand English, communicated with the police and doctors by scribbling notes on a pad. She claimed to be a ballet dancer and yoga practitioner from America who had moved to India 10 years earlier to study yoga and meditation, where she had married a man named "Satish". At some point in recent weeks, she said, she had fallen out with him, and he had responded by taking her into the forest and chaining her to a tree. Kayi also wrote that she had been given an "injection for extreme psychosis", which locked her jaw and prevented her from drinking water, and had been in the forest without either food or water for 40 days. "I am a victim and survived. But he ran away from here," she claimed. Police registered a case of attempted murder against "Satish" and set about tracing him, with no success, although they already had suspicions about Kayi's claims as it seemed unlikely that anyone could survive more than a few days without water, and certainly not 40 days. After further investigation, Saurabh Agarwal, superintendent of police for Sindhudurg, said that Kayi had confessed that she was not, in fact, married, and had chained herself to the tree not long before she was found. She explained that she was probably suffering from hallucinations when she gave her first statement. Kayi admitted to police that she had become distressed because her visa had run out and she was short of money, so had bought the locks and chains herself and tied herself to the tree. She has been moved to a psychiatric hospital where her condition was said to be "improving" and police had traced relatives in the US to whom Kayi had spoken on the phone. *BBC News, 3+6 Aug 2024.*

ABOVE: American Lalita Kayi was found chained to a tree in Maharashtra, India, blaming an imaginary husband and claiming she had survived 40 days without food.

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

WOMBLES SAVE VAGINA MUSEUM

rollonfriday.com, 17 Nov 2023.

Gull rescued from hair extensions

BBC News, 4 July 2024.

HOLIDAY FLIGHTS TO KEEP ON GOING UP

Hull Daily Mail, 4 June 2024.

My dragon got lost in bush all summer

Metro, 30 Oct 2023.

BODIES ARE FALLING IN SILENCE

Toronto Star, 14 Jan 2024.

'Friendly giant' died after falling off bike when two fighting cats got caught in his wheels

Independent, 14 Aug 2024.

SIDELINES

BRICKING IT

Tired of near misses with drivers on pedestrian crossings, road safety advocates Vision Zero Vancouver (VZV) created the "Pedestrian Brick Crossing System". This was two baskets of rubber bricks on opposite sides of the busy Granville Island crossing, with users invited to take one to brandish at cars as they crossed. VZV say that when people carry bricks, drivers "suddenly have no problem seeing them and stopping!" *dailyhive.com/Vancouver, 1 Apr 2024.*

GASSY GRIEF

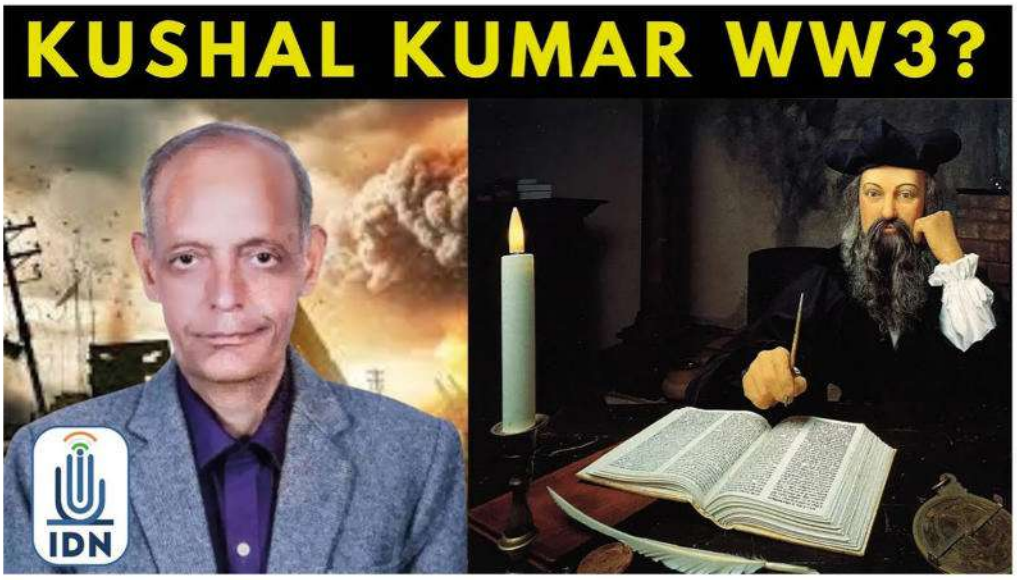
For some reason, a UK gambling website decided to investigate the number of people seeking online help for farting problems. They discovered that two million British people seek ways of controlling unwanted flatulence in public places each year, while a further 100,000 are looking for ways to rein in their partner's farting. "Our research shows a lot of people want help," they say. *Sun, 29 Apr 2024.*

KNOBS OUT

The Dorset Knob Throwing Games, which involve hurling the county's traditional dry, spherical, knob biscuits as far as possible, were held in Cattistock, near Dorchester, from 2008 but ended in 2019 as crowds had become too large. They have now been revived as part of the Cattistock Countryside Show, and will include knob painting, a knob and spoon race, guess the weight of the big knob, knob darts and a knob pyramid. Organiser Ian Gregory says, "We are not doing knob eating this year – we don't want people choking on a knob – but you can pin the knob on the Cerne Abbas Giant." *BBC News, 5 Apr 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

PREDICTIONS | Two new Nostradamuses, plus lions and meerkats, attempt to peer into the future



ABOVE: India's "New Nostradamus" Kushal Kumar has been using astrology to predict the start of World War III–although the date keeps changing. **BELOW:** Athol Salomé looks happy enough, despite predicting a future ravaged by AI and EMP weapons.

NOSTRADAMNED

Dubbed "The New Nostradamus", Indian astrologer Kushal Kumar has been busy predicting the beginning of World War III using a Vedic astrology chart (see **FT447:20**). He first proposed 10 June, which passed without trouble, so bounced back with a new date; "NOW, Tuesday, 18 June 2024 has the strongest planetary stimulus to trigger WW3," said Kumar on 14 June. He cited a number of signs that this was coming, including the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash, a terror attack that killed nine Hindu pilgrims in the Himalayas, a Russian nuclear submarine visiting Cuba, and the escalation of Israel's onslaught on Gaza, with Lebanon's Hezbollah militias becoming involved. "Watch the developing war scenario in hotspots across the globe as days pass by," he said. He also hedged his bets, suggesting that 29 June might be the day war started instead. June, though, passed without a global conflagration igniting; but, undeterred, Kumar was back in July with some new dates, saying that "some worrisome news reports in other potential war hotspots across the globe

Kumar cited a number of signs that World War III was coming

have also appeared in media during July 2024, particularly covering 24 and 26 July." However, July also passed relatively peacefully, so at the end of the month Kumar revised his prediction once more saying, "August 4 and 5 would call for utmost caution and care," backed by a lengthy and detailed prognostication involving two Russian and two Chinese bombers flying near Alaska, Romanian concerns about Ukraine and Russia, military drills in Cuba, and tensions between China and Taiwan, adding "It looks likely that the crucial focus or epicentre could be sea or ocean. But land and air cannot be counted as less important." He has not yet provided any further updates. *dailystar.co.uk, 29 Jul 2024, nypost.com, 14 Jun 2024.*

AND ANOTHER ONE!

In Brazil, the "living Nostradamus", 36-year-old Athos Salomé (**FT441:5**), seems to be doing rather better, having allegedly predicted the coronavirus pandemic, Elon Musk buying Twitter and Queen Elizabeth's death. Speaking in April, some time before Crowdstrike caused mayhem by accidentally triggering a major Microsoft outage in July, he warned we would see technology blackouts this year that would throw the world into chaos. After the event, though, he went on to warn that this would also lead to World War III, saying "Microsoft's global shutdown may affect essential infrastructure with the escalation of inter-state confrontation and lead to Cyber War." He went on to suggest that such a war would involve the use of electromagnetic pulse weapons (EMP) that can overload and destroy electronic infrastructure over wide areas, and predicted AI would be important in future conflict, saying that "AI

ATHOL SALOMÉ

emerges as a factor possibly serving as both a peacekeeping tool and an instigator of fresh confrontations." Salomé also predicted "three days of darkness" in 2024, which he linked to a coronal mass ejection from the Sun; he has since said that he did not intend to suggest literal darkness, but was alluding to tensions between Israel and Iran, potentially triggering a World War. *dailymail.co.uk, 19 Jul 2024.*

PYRAMID OF DOOM

On 30 June, heavy rains in Mexico caused part of an ancient pyramid at Ihuatzio in Michoacán state to collapse. The Yácata pyramids were built by ancestors of the modern Purépecha people, who still live in the area, and are said to have been used for human sacrifices to their most important god, Kurikweri. Local leader Tariakuiri Alvarez said that the pyramid collapse was an omen of impending doom. "For our ancestors, the builders, this was a bad omen that indicated the proximity of an important event," he said. "Before the arrival of the conquistadors, something similar happened, which for the Purépecha worldview of that time was because the gods Nana Kuerhaepiri and K'eri Kurikweri were displeased." The Mexican National Institute for Anthropology and History was more sanguine, saying "Work carried out in the past, using techniques and materials that are not currently in use due to their negative effects, has an impact on the conservation conditions of the pre-Columbian structure," and vowed to restore the pyramid using more sympathetic and durable materials and techniques. *thesun.ie, 9 Aug 2024.*

INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA E HISTORIA

ABOVE: The collapsed end of one of Mexico's Yacata pyramids: a bad omen? **BELOW:** Meerkats at Drusillas Wildlife Park managed to predict England's Euro 2024 wins.

MANY LIONS

Presumably inspired by the England shirt, several wildlife parks set their lions to predicting England's performance in the Euro 2024 football tournament. "Rana the Psychic Lion", from the Cotswold Wildlife Park near Burford, Oxfordshire, made predictions by putting his paws on the team flags, but got off to a bad start by suggesting a draw for the opening England/Serbia match, which England won easily. At Noah's Ark Zoo Farm, near Bristol, Arusha and her cubs, Kojo and Tau, made predictions by choosing food from boxes marked with flags, and optimistically backed England to win the whole tournament, while West Midlands Safari Park's lions used the same method to predict failure. Their keeper, though, was optimistic, pointing out that the lions had never made a correct prediction – but, alas, they did this time. At Dudley Zoo, a lion called Keshari made his choice by biting into papier mâché footballs painted with team colours, made by his keepers, and tipped England to win too. "He's been doing a really good job," said senior carnivore keeper Louisa Dorrington. Beating them all, though, were the meerkats of Drusillas Wildlife Park in East Sussex. To predict the outcome of England matches, the meerkats were given buckets of nuts marked with the team flags, with the winner being the one from which the animals ate most nuts. they correctly predicted all England's wins, but keepers noticed that they showed some interest in the Netherlands' bucket, so suggested that match might not prove an easy victory. *thesun.co.uk, 15 Jun; Metro, 9 Jul; bbc.co.uk/news, 15 Jun, 11 Jul 2024.* Longtime FT readers may remember the sporting predictions of Paul the Psychic Octopus (**FT266:10-11, 294:48-51**).

DRUSILLAS WILDLIFE PARK / FACEBOOK

CRAP PREDICTIONS

Some sporting predictions, though, are more scientific than others. Veterinary researchers at the University of Surrey have found that they can predict the future success of a racehorse by analysing the bacteria in its gut when it is one month old. They monitored the bacteria in the digestive systems of more than 50 thoroughbred foals over the first three years of their lives by analysing their fæces and found that the more types of bacteria a foal had in its gut at four weeks, the better its future health and its success on the racecourse. *BBC News, 8 Aug 2024.*

SIDELINES

BEAT IT

Musa Dadayev, Minister of Culture for the Russian Republic of Chechnya, ruled by the repressive warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, notorious for his enthusiastic support of Vladimir Putin and his vicious anti-LGBTQ+ purges, has announced "that from now on all musical, vocal and choreographic works must correspond to a tempo of 80 to 116 beats per minute". This effectively bans much pop music and entire styles such as techno, and is apparently to ensure all music in the state "aligns with the Chechen mentality and musical rhythm". *cnnworld.com, 8 Apr 2024.*

ANCIENT IMPLANTS

The US version of *Antiques Roadshow* received a startling item to value – a guest brought along a pair of breast implants belonging to his grandmother. She had not actually had them implanted; they were an unused boxed pair from 1965 that she had found at a garage sale, complete with instructions. Experts valued them at $100 (£79). *Metro, 5 Feb 2024.*

RACEHORSE TRAINING

Passengers at Warwick Farm railway station in Sydney, Australia, were startled by an escaped racehorse that got onto the platform, where it chased passengers and attempted to board a train. Police and the horse's owner eventually rounded the animal up without any further incident and the railway operator reported that he was "returned to his residence in a stable condition". *upi.com, 10 Apr 2024.*

STIFF PENALTY

Possibly inspired by the Irish man who took his dead uncle to the post office to claim his pension [**FT418:10**], Erika de Souza Vieira Nunes wheeled her uncle's corpse to a bank in Rio de Janiero, Brazil, to try and take out a loan for 7,000 Brazilian Reais (£2,500) in his name. On CCTV she can be seen pretending to hold a conversation with the dead man, Paulo Roberto Braga, 68, while holding his head up and guiding his hand to "sign" documents. Suspicious bank staff called police and paramedics, who confirmed Braga had died some time before he was brought to the bank, leading to Nunes's arrest. *thesun.co.uk, 17 Apr 2024.*

SIDELINES...

GHOSTED

Despite being under a restraining order and having an anti-stalking tag fitted, an unnamed 48-year-old man disguised himself as a ghost by throwing a sheet over his head, then crept up to his ex-wife's house in Apulia, Italy, to hurl bricks at her windows. None of them hit their target, though, and police swiftly tracked the culprit down, putting him under house arrest as well as giving him an electronic tracking bracelet to supplement his tag. *dailymail.co.uk, 15 Apr 2024.*

FOILED!

In an attempt to smuggle rare reptiles from Hungary to Israel, a plane passenger in his 20s wrapped them in tinfoil and put them in a lunchbox disguised as an in-flight snack. This did not fool security at Ben Gurion airport who detected the five reptiles, confiscated them, and arrested the passenger. *Metro, 16 Jan 2023.*

ANCIENT BABY

A woman named only as Patricia has been having repeated problems booking air travel. Aged 101, she keeps getting mistaken for a baby because American Airlines' systems cannot deal with three-figure ages and register her as a one-year-old. Patricia is hoping the glitch can be fixed as it means airline staff keep expecting a baby who can be carried, not a senior needing a wheelchair. *BBC News, 28 Apr 2024.*

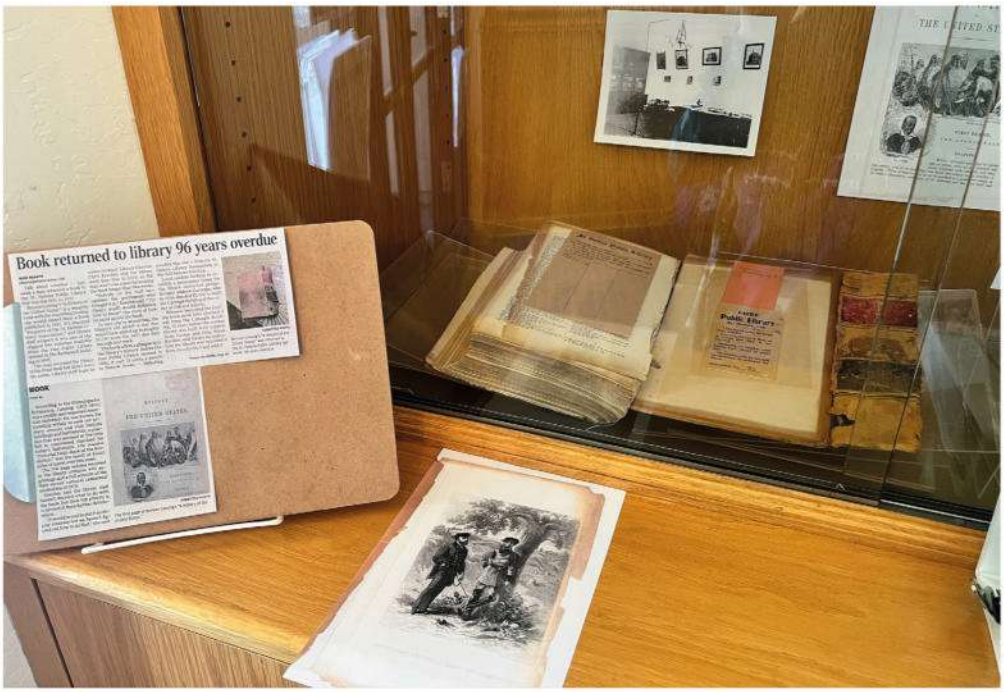
UFO AA

Jason Sands, who claims to have worked for a secret US Military UFO crash retrieval team, says he was on a convoy that was flagged down near a Nevada US Air Force site by a stranded alien who asked them to help with its craft, which had broken down. They suggested trying Area 51, as they might have the part the ET was looking for, but the being apparently said "No". *D.Star, 15 May 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

BETTER LATE...

More long errrant library books find their way home, sometimes over a century overdue



ST HELENA PUBLIC LIBRARY

ABOVE: A copy of *A History of the United States* published in 1881 was returned after 96 years to St Helena Public Library, where it is now on display. **BELOW:** *Famous Composers Vol. II* took 104 years to make its way back to St Paul Public Library.

After being on the loose for 104 years, a copy of *Famous Composers Vol. II* by Nathan Haskell Dole found its way back to the St Paul Public Library in Minnesota. It had been discovered by a resident of Hennepin County sorting through their mother's belongings. They spotted that it was a library book that had been due to be returned in 1919, so sent it back. The St Paul digital library coordinator, John Larson, investigated the book and discovered that it had been acquired by the library in 1914, and a year later had survived a fire at the city's Old Market Hall, where the library was then based. Although the blaze destroyed 160,000 books, a third of the collection, including *Famous Composers,* had been on loan at the time, so remained safe. A stamp from 1916 shows that it was re-entered into the revived library's collection, making it one of the few books from that period of the library's history to still be around and identifiable. Larson said the book would not return to circulation, as it was now in a fragile condition, but that the library would be keeping it. "It has reached a point where it's not just an old book – it's an artefact," he said. "It has a little bit of history to it." *theguardian.com, 18 Nov 2023.*

"It has reached a point where it's not just an old book – it's an artefact"

• Rummaging through a box of books that had belonged to his late wife, Sandra, at his home in Napa Valley, California, Jim Perry found a copy of Benson Lossing's *A History of the United States*, published in 1881. Looking inside, he realised that the book had been borrowed from the nearby St Helena Public Library and had been due back on 21 February 1927, but had not been returned, which meant that with the library levying a fine of five cents a day at the time the book was borrowed, he owed them about $1,756 (£1,417). Nevertheless, Perry returned the book to the library, initially just leaving it at the front desk without giving his name, but he was later tracked down after the library made a public appeal for more information about the book. He did not need to pay out, however, as St Helena library ceased charging fines in 2019. Perry said that he was "pretty sure" that the book would have been borrowed by Sandra's grandfather, John McCormick, a descendant of one of St Helena's oldest pioneer families. Library staff believe Lossing's *A History*

ST PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY

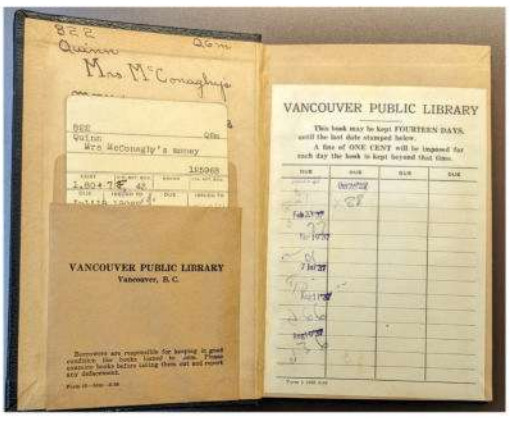
of the United States was one of the original 540 books that made up the library's predecessor, the St Helena Free Public Library, and is one of the few survivors. They have now put it on display in a glass case in the library entrance. *theguardian.com, 24 May 2024.*

• Just a month short of 90 years overdue, a copy of *Youth and Two Other Stories* by Joseph Conrad was posted to Larchmont Public Library in Westchester County, New York. It had been taken out in 1933, with a return date of 11 October. Joanie Morgan had found the book among her stepfather's belongings and had posted it back to the library. Despite the lengthy delay, though, the fine would only have been $5, as the library caps late charges at that level, although in this case it was waived. *nbcnewyork.com, 16 Oct 2023*

• In Vancouver, another errant volume made the news, in this case a copy of *Mrs McConaghy's Money, A Quiet Twelfth, and Collecting the Rent*, three comical plays taking a farcical look at working-class life in Belfast by now largely forgotten Irish playwright Hugh Quinn. This had been taken out from Vancouver Public Library in October 1937 and was finally returned in August 2023, nearly 86 years late, although it is not known who dropped the book off. The library late fees were one Canadian cent a day when the book was borrowed, which meant it would have only racked up a $310 fine over all that time, but as with most libraries these days, Vancouver has done away with late fines. "It's most likely that this item was no longer considered part of our collection once we made the shift to a computerised lending system, so we probably wouldn't have made the person pay anything anyway because it wasn't attached to an account," said a library spokesperson. *vancouverisawesome.com, 16 Aug 2023.*

ABOVE: *Father Tuck's Book of Animal Life*, back in Brookfields Primary School's library. **BELOW**: *Mrs McConaghy's Money*, returned to Vancouver Public Library 86 years late.

• A Finnish translation of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Refugees* made its way back to Helsinki Central Library 84 years after its due date of 26 December 1939. Librarian Heini Strand said, "The one who returned the book didn't tell – and we didn't ask – what was their relation to the one who originally borrowed the book," although she had an inkling as to why the book had not been returned on time – the Soviet Union invaded Finland on 30 November 1939, during the book's loan period. "The winter war had started just a month before the due date, so probably returning of a library loan wasn't the first thing on the borrower's mind at the due date," Strand said. As the book is in very good condition, the library is considering returning it to public borrowing. *edition.cnn.com, 31 May 2024.*



• A relative stripling in the overdue stakes is the copy of *Great Prime Ministers* by John Whittle that was supposed to have been returned to Manningtree Library in Essex on 30 June 1979 but didn't make it back until January 2024, nearly 45 years late. The Prime Minister at the time of its return, Rishi Sunak, had not been born when the book was borrowed. On receiving the book, a library spokesperson said, "Despite being more than four decades overdue, the book is in good condition and the customer was encouraged to rejoin the library." *D.Mirror, 23 Jan 2024.*

• Staff at Brookfields Primary School in Birmingham were surprised to receive a parcel containing a copy of a book entitled *Father Tuck's Book of Animal Life,* which had last been part of the school library in 1904 according to a sticker in the front of the book. It was not an overdue return, though, as the sticker also recorded that it had been presented to a pupil named Florence Taylor in recognition of her good behaviour. The book had been discovered at a charity jumble sale in Dorset by Cindie Raven, who researched its origins and decided to send the book home. "It is a little bit of history," she said. "I picked it up a couple of years ago and it has been sitting in a box in my house. I thought it should be returned to the school at which it was first presented all those years ago." Brookfields Primary School's head teacher, Leanne Mahony, said it was a real joy to see the book. "Books are such an important part of school life and there is something reassuring in seeing that is something that has endured over the years." *BBC News, 8 Feb 2024.*

SIDELINES...

BOOOORING!

When Randy Smith recorded a two-hour tutorial on how to use Microsoft Word for his employers, Florida Marketing International, in 1989 he had no idea that people would still be watching it more than 30 years later. However, he was stunned to discover that it has had an afterlife as the "most boring video of all time", getting more than three million views on YouTube from people using it to help them get to sleep. Smith was completely oblivious to this until he received a text from a stranger thanking him for helping them with their insomnia. *dailymail.co.uk, 7 May 2024.*

VERY POLITE

During his Sunday sermon Reverend Glenn Germany, pastor at Jesus' Dwelling Place Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was shocked when a man in the congregation leapt to his feet and aimed a gun at him. The weapon fortunately jammed, and the assailant was subdued by other churchgoers. On arrival the police identified Germany's attacker as Bernard Polite, who immediately apologised for his actions, saying that voices in his head had said "go shoot the pastor". *BBC News, 6 May 2024.*

ELECTION SURPRISE

Kaz Macklin received the fewest votes in the election for Boxley Parish Council in Kent but has been appointed to the council anyway due to a mistake made by the returning officer who managed the election. They read Macklin's name out first, in error, but once a returning officer declares a result, in law, it cannot be overturned except by a lengthy High Court challenge, so her appointment stands. Macklin intends to serve the full term, and the rightful winner, Stephen Mayes, magnanimously said, "It wasn't her fault. She is a fantastic person who will do a good job." *D.Star, 18 May 2024.*

PURRRFECT RECORD

With a volume of 54.6 decibels, Bella, a 14-year-old tabby cat from Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, has taken the Guinness World Record for the loudest purr, beating the previous record of 50 decibels. Owner Nicole Spink said that Bella's purr, which is as loud as a boiling kettle, regularly drowned out their TV. *D.Mail, 18 Oct 2023.*

BROOKFIELDS PRIMARY SCHOOL

VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

SIDELINES...

GAME OFF

Yan Chenglong, 48, has been banned from Xiangqi, a game sometimes known as Chinese chess, after winning the title of 'Xiangqi King' at a national tournament held in Hainan. Chenglong had been accused of cheating by using radio controlled anal beads to receive messages during the tournament. Although the Chinese Xiangqi Association says this is impossible to prove, they stripped him of his title and banned him for a year for behaviour "that violated public order and good morals" after he allegedly defecated in a hotel bath during a drunken post tournament celebration. *BBC News, 26 Dec 2023.*

DEAD WRONG

Faced with having to pay out $100,000 (£79,000) in child support, Jesse Kipf, 39, from Kentucky, believed he had found the perfect way to dodge his responsibilities. He hacked into the Hawaii death registry and created a record of his own death, which then showed up in other US Government databases. However, his ruse was soon rumbled, and he has been charged with computer fraud and aggravated identity theft, and now faces jail time, plus a hefty fine, as well as still having to pay the child support. *D.Mirror, 13 Aug 2024.*

FINGER RULE

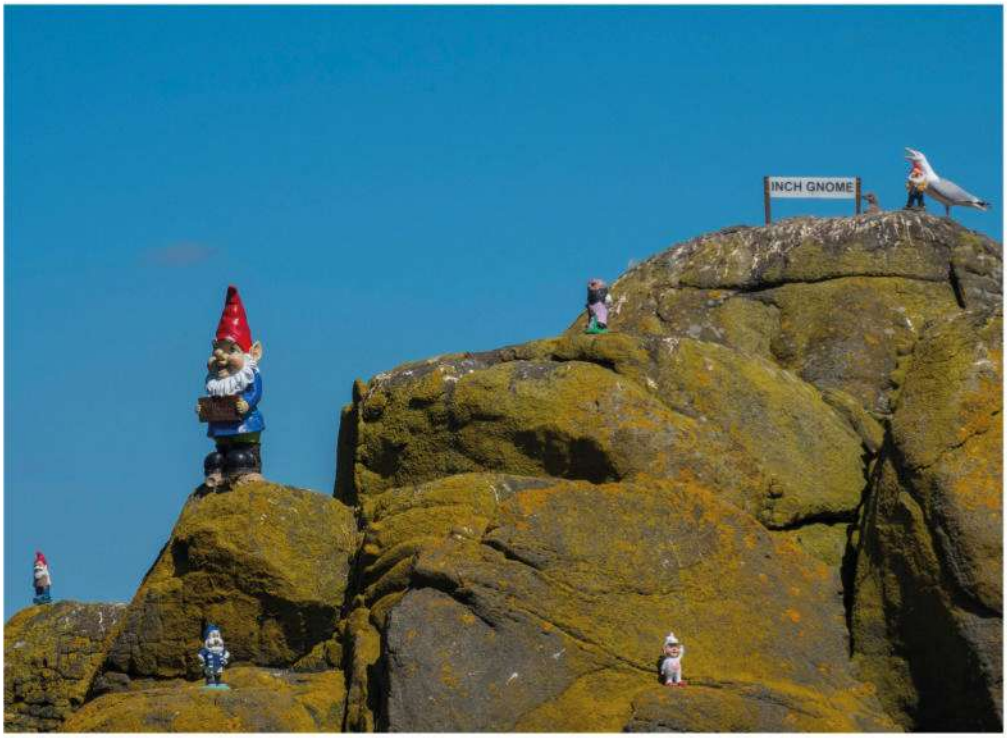
Steffen Karlson, 31, a naval officer from Trondheim, Norway, had had a 10cm (4in) ruler tattooed onto his index finger, saying, "I wanted to use my fingers for measurements. I love it. It's a useful tattoo." It has met with mixed reactions. "A third say 'that's genius'," but others say, "That's stupid, your finger will grow", although at 31 that's unlikely. *Metro, 1 Apr 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

GNOME HOME

Scotland's 'Inch Gnome Island' is home to a growing population of little people

HAZEL PLATER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



JAMES POOTS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Inchcolm Island, a tiny uninhabited rocky outcrop in the Firth of Forth in Scotland, is home to an ever-increasing population of garden gnomes. They first appeared in 2010, and according to tourist boat skipper Scott Aston, "Nobody knows how they got there or why they are there – but they seem to multiply every winter," adding that they have proved very amusing to his clients. Another local said "It is a bit of fun and some people say they got there after escaping from a garden centre in Edinburgh. *Metro, 23 Apr 2024.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

As the US election campaign heats up, conspiracies are likely to haunt all the candidates, and, as **NOEL ROONEY** notes, the fall-out from 6 January 2021 may even reach Kamala Harris...

THE GHOSTS OF J6

The upcoming US election will, as observers have pointed out, include a number of firsts: the first candidate who is technically a convicted felon; the first black woman (and simultaneously the first woman of Indian heritage); and the first descendant of the doomed Kennedy generation. It will be unprecedented in another way too; all the candidates carry conspiratorial baggage.

Robert Kennedy Junior, assuming he makes it that far (that's obviously not meant as an ominous Nostradamus-esque stage whisper) will bring the legacy of two famous – and famously disputed – assassinations to the voting booths. At the very least, that's a carrot to dangle before the more assiduous – or asinine – members of the lone nut gun club.

Donald Trump recently survived an assassination attempt, one that has provoked conspiracy theories from both ends of the impressively attenuated political spectrum (**FT448:4-5, 42-45**; see also p.22 this issue). And that show is still running. Thomas Crooks, the would-be assassin who couldn't hit a barn door with another lone nut's gun, is now seen as a member of a firing range frequented by serving members of the FBI, rather like the evolution of Sirhan Sirhan's backstory. A dyed-in-the-wool conspiracist might be forgiven for thinking that something of a playbook has developed in the world of assassinations.

His body was cremated before the autopsy report was published (it still hasn't been at the time of writing), which has prompted both trenchant criticism from members of Congress and haunting echoes of the JFK story, where bodies underwent miraculous changes in transit.

TYLER MERBLER / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The FBI couldn't work out where the remote control was

The crime scene in Butler, Pennsylvania, was cleaned up first and investigated second, an inversion of protocol that seems to strike regularly when big bad things happen in America: more pages for the playbook, if that's what one believes.

Kamala Harris may well shrug off the conspiracies around her nomination (did she help to push Joe out? Did Obama the puppet master not want her nominated?) before November; and she is probably insulated from the worst of the Hunter Biden fallout, which is gathering momentum now Sleepy Joe is out of the race. But one ghost will be harder to evade, at least as far as the C-sphere is concerned. Her connection to the events of 6 January 2021 (shared with Trump, but in rather different ways) is coming under increasing scrutiny.

Ms Harris's part in J6 was not initially prominent; she was more what the gaming community calls a 'NPC' or non-player character. She didn't stand shoulder to shoulder with the beleaguered politicos in the Capitol, ready to face an armed insurrection carried out, oddly, by unarmed insurrectionists. In fact, that fateful day in January might have passed unremarked as far as she was concerned. Except for the pipe bombs.

A pipe bomb was discovered outside the Capitol building on J6 and it caused some excitement at first. The FBI confirmed it was a working bomb, primed to go off, and then interest in it waned, perhaps in the face of addled insurrectionists in Viking helmets being rounded up and sent to trial. Conspiracist interest perked up again when the FBI indicated that it was a remote controlled device, but they couldn't work out where the remote control was. And then there was the other pipe bomb.

Actually, there were two more pipe bombs: one outside DNC (Democrat) HQ; and one outside RNC (Republican) HQ; the bombers, it appears, evidenced a degree of even-handedness noticeably absent elsewhere during the event. The Republican bomb has rather disappeared from history; the Democrat version, however, has experienced something of a resurgence due to security camera footage coming to light.

The video footage shows a lot of unusual behaviour. Some observers suggest it shows the police planting the bomb; that requires a rather developed interpretation, but it's got some traction online. It certainly shows police and security officers acting in a very relaxed way, given the situation. At least one individual takes a coffee break on a park bench right next to the bomb. And some time after the announcement of its discovery, a party of schoolchildren is allowed to walk within a few yards of the spot; an eccentric approach to national security.

Ms Harris, as mentioned, was in the building most of the time. At least, that's now the official story; at first, it was claimed she was elsewhere. More to the point, there is no evidence of a full-scale alert or any attempt to evacuate the Vice-President from a potentially lethal situation. The usual protocol was, once again, inverted.

This sequence of events, odd as it may be, does not in any way implicate Kamala Harris in skulduggery. It does, however, place her more centrally in the events of J6; and that is often enough to galvanise the C-sphere. Being part of the story is equivalent to being part of the plot. Ms Harris is Establishment enough to fit the general conspiratorial bill and, as some have predicted, the truth (the truther truth, that is) will eventually out.

It is unlikely that the J6 link will compromise Harris's election campaign; unkind commentators, amused at her penchant for what many media outlets call 'word salad', suggest self-sabotage is a far more probable obstacle. And the alt-right is lining up a fusillade of accusations from her time as VP, ensuring that her path to the White House is strewn with as many historical caltrops as possible.

Three tempting targets for the lone nut fraternity? Perhaps that's a step too far; but with the unprecedented animosity of this most partisan of elections, and an atmosphere that will only become more febrile, nothing, as they say, is off the table.

www.globalresearch.ca/trump-shooter-thomas-matthew-crooks-body-gone/5865470; www.zerohedge.com/political/new-video-appears-show-dc-police-units-planting-j6-pipe-bomb; https://everydaypatriot.news/cias-role-in-january-6-capitol-events-under-scrutiny-judicial-watch-demands-answers/; www.declassified.live/p/another-suspicious-moment-in-dnc

PAUL DEVEREUX rounds up the latest news from Stonehenge, Orkney and Italy

TIM O'BRIEN / NESS OFBRODGAR TRUST

ITALIAN MINISTRY OF CULTURE

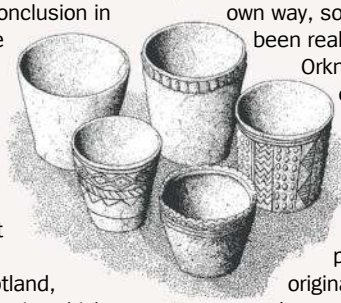
ABOVE LEFT: Aerial view of excavations at the Neolithic complex, the Ness of Brodgar, Orkney. **BELOW**: Examples of Orcadian Grooved Ware **ABOVE RIGHT**: One of the murals inside the tomb unearthed in Giugliano, Italy – a painting of two ichthyocentaurs, or sea-centaurs, holding a circular shield next to two Cupid-like babies.

ALTAR STONE IMPLICATIONS

This column must report on the current big archæological news, described by researchers as "shocking" and "jaw-dropping"– namely, concerning the provenance of the once standing central stone of Stonehenge, the Altar Stone, now buried beneath a tumble of stones from a fallen trilithon. The large sarsen stones (the famous lintel-topped uprights) are local, Wiltshire, the smaller bluestones, broadly speaking, are from Preseli, in the part of the British Isles that came to be known as Wales, and while it was always recognised that the 6-tonne (6,000kg) Altar Stone was a different rock, it was simply assumed it came from another Welsh source. Over the past two decades, though, there has been increased questioning about the provenance of the stone, resulting in a final conclusion in 2023 that it could not have come from Wales.

Now, using highly sophisticated lithic chemistry analysis, a kind of 'fingerprinting' of rock sources, the Altar Stone seems to have most likely originated in northern what-came-to-be-called Scotland, specifically, the Orcadian Basin, which includes the Moray Firth and the Orkney Islands. This astounding finding was made by a team from Curtin University, Western Australia, led by PhD student Anthony Clarke. Curtin has one of the most comprehensive global rock fingerprint databases. *BBC News, 14 Aug; original source: Nature vol.632, pp. 570–575, 14 Aug 2024*.

The implications of this new information are huge and complicated. For a start, how did the stone get from its northern source to southern England, a distance of up to about 700 miles (1,126km)? By land, sea or via glacial action? (Think of the controversy that still surrounds how the bluestones reached Stonehenge from southern Wales, a considerably shorter distance!) And what was it about the area of Wiltshire where Stonehenge and its neighbouring monuments stand that occasioned such massive effort, ingenuity and engineering in Neolithic times that brought distant megaliths to it? Whatever, the iconic monument that is Stonehenge clearly stands as a symbol in stone of the whole of what is now known as the British Isles. Speculation and arguments will rage for ages.



ALAN BRABY, FROM COWIE & MACSWEEN 1999

Neolithic Britain is emerging as being far more organised, connected, and, in its own way, socially advanced than had been realised. This becomes clear in Orkney, where there remains an exceptional number of major megalithic monuments, including a possibly Neolithic university or temple complex (Ness of Brodgar), and where a pottery style, 'Grooved Ware', originated. Some of this was decorated with geometric patterns, and analysis of certain samples showed they, at least, had contained henbane, a hallucinogen. Grooved Ware has been found in numerous prehistoric monuments throughout Britain, including places like Durrington Walls, very close to Stonehenge. These various clues have caused this columnist to speculate elsewhere that Orkney harboured a sophisticated Neolithic culture, and that perhaps representatives of its religion or cult travelled around Britain (for a deeper discussion, see my *The Long Trip*, 1997/2008). It also leads to suspicion that the Altar Stone originated in Orkney.

MYSTERY SKELETON

In 2003, a tomb dated to c.200 BC was accidentally unearthed during infrastructure work in Giugliano, in Campania near Naples, Italy. Investigating archæologists have found the tomb to be very well preserved and decorated with murals of mythical creatures – namely, Cerberus, the triple-headed hellhound, and two sea-centaurs (ichthyocentaurs), each with a human head and torso, the front legs of a horse, and a fish's tail. But the tomb contained something even more remarkable – the skeleton of someone seemingly very special. Not only was it placed in this decorated tomb, but had been covered with a shroud, which had mineralised in the exceptional preservative conditions inside in the tomb. The individual was accompanied by grave goods, including a strigil (tool for scaping dirt and impurities off the skin prior to bathing) and jars of ointments, apparently containing absinthe and the plant goosefoot. The interdisciplinary team of investigators are continuing their research, including pollen analysis, the DNA of the deceased, and the origin of the yarn used for the shroud.

The identity of the person can only be surmised at this stage. It may have been some high-status or revered figure in society, perhaps suffering from poor health to judge from the emphasis on creams among the grave goods – or, conversely, perhaps a great healer. *Live Science, 29 July 2024. (Original statement from the Ministry of Culture, Italy.)*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

301: IDES AND SEEK

"Assassination is the extreme form of censorship" – Bernard Shaw

When news of the attempted assassination of Donald Trump broke, I immediately had two thoughts: First, how many people would have secretly wished the gunman had been a better shot? Second, whilst being an unsocial media virgin, I felt sure there'd be conspiracy theories that Trump had arranged the whole thing to win public sympathy – and I gather such notions promptly surfaced.

No shortage, of course, of high-profile assassinations in the Græco-Roman-Byzantine worlds. For a full discussion of Greek cases, see Cinzia Bearnot, 'Political Murder in Classical Greece,' *Ancient Society* 37 (2007), 37-61. Biggest sensation in Athens was the murder in 461 BC of the democratic leader and precursor of Pericles, Ephialtes. Writing somewhat later in 420, Antiphon (*Oration* 5. 68) stated that the assassin remained unknown. Aristotle, though (*Athenian Constitution* 25. 4), around 325 fingered Aristodikos of Tanager as the culprit. Like everything else about this, how Aristotle knew his identity is unknown. For modern speculations, see Duane Roller, 'Who Murdered Ephialtes?', *Historia* 36 (1989), 257-66.

Another sensational case was the assassination of the exiled demagogue Hyperbolus, an act hailed by Thucydides (8.73) as a blessing for the state.

Of course, the most famous ancient political assassination was that of Julius Cæsar in 44BC – see the account in my *Roman Emperors* (1980) and Mary Beard's up-to-the-minute blog. Cæsar was forteanly stabbed 23 times, so the contemporary post-mortem verified, by 60 conspirators, many of whom only managed to stab each other. As Kenneth Williams, playing Cæsar in *Carry On, Cleo* put it: "Infamy, Infamy, They've all got it in for me."

As Beard and myself note, Shakespeare badly misleads when it comes to Brutus. Far from being 'honourable', this is a man who lent out money at a compound interest of 48% (four times the legal Roman limit) and sent in soldiers to extort repayments at sword-point.

Although stating that Tiberius died from natural causes, Suetonius in his biography (ch73) says there were various rumours of murder, either Caligula slipping him poison or prætorian perfect Macro smothering him with bedclothes, the version preferred by Tacitus (*Annals*, bk6 ch50) and Robert Graves in *I, Claudius*.

As prætorian prefect, Macro was in charge of imperial security. Tiberius's successor, Caligula, was likewise stabbed to death by a group of disaffected prætorians (Suetonius, ch69). Shades of Anwar Sadat and Indira Gandhi, both done in by their own bodyguards.

Caligula was in fact cut down with multiple blows while walking through a covered path that connected palace with theatre where he had been to inspect a new intake of comely boy actors. For good measure, the assassins stabbed his wife to death and dashed out the brains of his infant daughter against a wall.

Claudius may or may not have been bumped off with a dish of poisoned mushrooms; see my detailed investigation in **FT206:21** – there remains mushroom for speculation…

Two emperors were lynched – Galba by a mob in the Forum and decapitated, Vitellius put to the 'Death of a Thousand Cuts', a procedure assisted by his extreme obesity.

Domitian (Suetonius, ch21) famously opined that emperors were unlucky in that nobody believed in plots against them unless they were actually killed – he was duly murdered by a palace conspiracy in AD96.

A century or so later, on New Year's Eve, AD192, Commodus was strangled by a masseur (arranged by his mistress Marcia) in his tub, a suitable location in that he bathed seven times a day, and shades of French revolutionary Marat, despatched by Charlotte Corday.

Commodus was inevitably rumoured to have poisoned his father Marcus Aurelius. Before this, Trajan was thought by some to have been made away with by wife Plotina, whilst his successor Hadrian's reputed last words were the quotation "Many doctors have killed the king". Such rumours were bound to gain currency in a world that knew nothing of embolisms, heart attacks, strokes, or the like.

Two of Commodus's successors, Pertinax and Didius Julianus, were assassinated by their troops, as would be many between 235-85, the so-called 'Age of Anarchy'. Most exotic was the fate of Caracalla, stabbed by a bodyguard when he dismounted from his horse to have a pee (*Augustan History*, ch7).

The life-style of teenaged emperor Elagabalus was so extreme that his death was almost bound to be equally colourful. According to the *Augustan History* (ch17) he was slain by some soldiers as he cowered in a latrine, his body then thrown into a sewer so mutinous as to spew it out.

In AD343, Julian, the last pagan emperor, was killed in battle by a spear. It was subsequently claimed by the pagan orator Libanius (*Oration* 18, ch274) that the weapon had actually been thrown by a Christian soldier in the ranks.

Of the 88 Byzantine rulers, 33 were assassinated, a statistic that speaks for itself. We may add in Irene's blinding of her own son (AD797) to have him disqualified from the throne, also Andronicus I, hideously tortured for days on end by a mob before being hung upside-down in the Hippodrome (AD1185) – I refrain from cataloguing the details, as revolting as those in the case of Damiens, would-be assassin of Louis XV of France (1757).

The words 'assassin/assassination' are of Arab derivation. There was actually an Order of Assassins in the mediæval Near East. A Russian slang term, originating in the 19th-century, translates into 'Wetwork' or 'Wet Job' – I have read that it has been adopted by the CIA…

Secret punches and sudden death

Before delivering his fabled death blow, DAVID HAMBLING shares the science behind it...

It has long been whispered that certain martial arts masters can kill with a secret punch without leaving a bruise. FT reader Mark Pearson recently alluded to this in a letter (**FT446:61**) about Alexei Navalny (alleged victim of such a blow), suggesting that a particular punch was banned in bare-knuckle boxing due to its deadliness. Incredible as it may seem, there is a real and deadly science behind such stories.

Italian physician Giovanni Lancisi documented the first case in his 1707 book *De Subitaneis Mortibus* ("On Sudden Death"). Lancisi, an expert on heart conditions and doctor to three popes, wrote: "I once saw the knot of life instantly undone when a man received a powerful blow from a fist under the xiphoid cartilage."

The xiphoid process is at the base of the breastbone and starts as flexible cartilage but ossifies and becomes bone by around the age of 40. It is mainly notable as a useful landmark for cardiac surgery, and for correct placement of the hands in CPR.

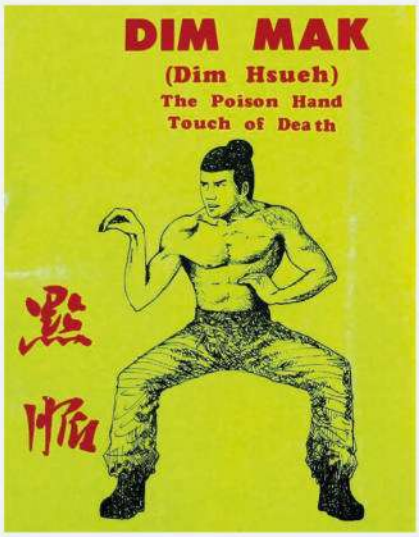
A well-documented case occurred in 1898 in England, when a 13-year-old cricketer was struck in the chest by a ball "of moderate velocity" while batting. The boy collapsed and died soon afterwards without any obvious sign of injury. A court ruled that the death was accidental.

Further cases appeared in the 20th century, mainly involving young men on the sports field. A study of ball games in the US between 1973 and 1995 found that chest impacts caused almost twice as many deaths as head impacts. Victims had an average age of 15 and virtually none were over 20.

Objects involved in sudden death impacts have included cricket, lacrosse and baseballs, hockey pucks, soccer balls, hockey sticks and even snowballs, as well as knees, feet, elbows, shoulders, fists, and goalposts. The incidents happened during fighting, falls, "hiccup remedy by a friend", and a charging collie dog running into a child.

The medical explanation emerged in 1932 when Georg Schlomka and colleagues at Bonn University were exploring the effect of blows to the heart using the newly developed electrocardiogram (ECG). Experimenting on anæsthetized rabbits, Schlomka found that hammer blows could produce ventricular fibrillation, irregular heart rhythm which can result in death.

In 1934 Schlomka used the term *commotio cordis*, Latin for "agitation of the heart", to describe the condition. It took another six years for researchers to determine the critical factor was the exact timing during the heart's cycle of activity.



Legend has it that Bruce Lee was killed by a Dim Mak master for refusing to give in to extortion

The efficient pumping on the heart relies on a set of muscles contracting and relaxing in a precisely co-ordinated manner. Timing is controlled by a set of pacemaker nerve cells sending electrical impulses (which modern medicine can replace with an electronic pacemaker). After each impulse, these cells go through a brief phase of 'repolarisation,' as they reset for the next pulse.

A sharp blow during the repolarisation phase can upset the timing, leading to fibrillation and *commotio cordis*. There are two important aspects to this. One is the force of the blow needed, which is less in younger people because their chest walls are much softer and offer less protection.

A hard blow can produce *commotio cordis* even in an adult. In January 2023, 24-year-old American footballer Damar Hamlin, playing for the Buffalo Bills, tackled another player whose helmet impacted Hamlin's chest. Both men went down. Hamlin stood up again, took a few steps, then collapsed and went into cardiac arrest.

Hamlin received CPR and was rushed unconscious to hospital. He made a gradual recovery, leaving hospital nine days later. In seven months he was back on the football field. (Surprisingly, Hamlin did not win the "NFL Comeback Player of the Year" award; that went to Joe Flacco whose less dramatic story involved returning to the top tier after nine years).

Commotio cordis is also a concern to developers of rubber bullets, who must balance stopping power with safety. To avoid head injuries, rubber bullets are usually aimed at the centre of mass, near the xiphoid area. Even supposedly safe weapons can be dangerous. In 2012 a 43-year-old man died of *commotio cordis* after being shot by French police with a 'Flashball' rubber bullet gun.

The other key factor is timing. Repolarisation only takes about 2% to 3% of the cardiac cycle. This means that on average it would take 30 to 50 impacts to have any chance at all of *commotio cordis*.

This leads to the question of whether the legendary Dim Mak, popular in martial arts movies, could be real. Literally 'press artery', Dim Mak is supposedly a set of secret techniques derived from traditional Chinese medicine. It can supposedly disable or kill an opponent by targeting certain critical points on the body, even causing delayed death, like malignant acupuncture. Legend has it that Bruce Lee was killed by a Triad Dim Mak master for refusing to give in to extortion. Medical evidence says Lee died of brain swelling from an allergic reaction to headache medication (see **FT217:52**)

Many martial artists have claimed to know Dim Mak, but there are no reliable records and its existence is questionable. However, it is certainly possible that a blow or kick could cause death by *commotio cordis*, and this might later be claimed to be the result of some secret technique.

Commotio cordis does not seem to have featured in bare-knuckle boxing. Boxer John Broughton introduced the first formal rules in 1743 after killing coachman George Stephenson in a fight, but his Broughton Rules only prohibited hitting a man when he was down, or punches below the belt. The 1843 London Prize Ring Rules also allowed any blow.

The most important thing to know about *commotio cordis* is that prompt CPR is effective in keeping the patient alive. Just place your hands about two finger widths above the xiphoid process and press hard enough to affect the heart.

SWORD SWIPED

Durandel, the "French Excalibur" said to be the fabled sword of French hero Roland, has been stolen from its rocky resting place

For 1250 years, allegedly, the village of Rocamadour in the south of France has had Durandal, the sword of the legendary hero Roland, embedded in a cliff 32ft (10m) off the ground in the centre of the village. No longer, though; sometime during the night of 21 June, it was stolen, with police being baffled as to how someone could make off with a sword firmly secured in such a position without being seen, particularly as it was chained down.

Durandal, often described as "The French Excalibur", has a fabled history. It is supposed to have been given to the Emperor Charlemagne by an angel and wielded in battle by his nephew Roland. Legend tells that the sword could not be broken and was the sharpest blade ever created, able to slice through boulders with one stroke. It was supposed to have these miraculous powers because the hilt contained a tooth of St Peter, the blood of St Basil, and the hair of St Denis. In the 11th century epic *The Song of Roland* the great hero is said to have made his last stand in 778 at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, high in the Pyrenees on the border between France and Spain, fighting a horde of Saracens against impossible odds. According to the epic, Roland died with Durandal hidden under his body, but local legend around Rocamadour gives an alternative ending. Before his death, Roland tried to smash Durandal on a rock to prevent it falling into heathen hands, but it would not break, so, with the assistance of Archangel Michael, he threw it into the air and, after miraculously flying for many miles, the sword immovably embedded itself in the cliff at Rocamadour where it has remained ever since.

As with all such legends, the story is not quite what it seems. A sword said to be Roland's did apparently end up in Rocamadour in the 11th century, but probably not by miraculous means, and it was not embedded in anything; it was kept in a

PATRICK CLENET / CREATIVE COMMONS

The hero is said to have made his last stand at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass

chapel dedicated to Mary, from which the French king Henry the Young stole it in 1183. After the embedding legend arose, successive replica swords have been made and wedged in a cleft in the local cliff face, with several previous incarnations also being stolen. The latest one to go missing was made of sheet metal and was not of particularly ancient origin, it was the "umpteenth copy" of the original, said Father Florent Millet, rector of the sanctuary of Rocamadour, and had in fact been removed before, having been loaned to the Cluny Museum in Paris in 2011. Nonetheless, although acknowledging that the sword was "a copy of a copy of a copy", Dominique Lenfant, Rocamadour's mayor, said "We're going to miss Durandal; it's

DYNAMOSQUITO / CREATIVE COMMONS

TOP: Durandal embedded in a cliff in the village of Rocamadour in the south of France. **ABOVE:** The picturesque village with its monastic buildings and citadel.

been part of Rocamadour for centuries. Rocamadour feels it's been robbed of a part of itself, but even if it's a legend, the destinies of our village and this sword are entwined." While there seem to be no leads as to who took the sword, its theft is being linked to French politics. "The far right would code the sword as a signature piece of French national identity," said Helen Solterer, a professor of romance studies at Duke University. "The sword, which Roland struggled so hard to keep away from Muslim hands to preserve honor, Christianity and Frenchness is now gone." Lenfant, though, said that four different blacksmiths have offered to recreate the sword for free, so a new "Durandal" is likely to return to the cliff soon. *dailymail.co.uk, 3 Jul; thedebrief.org, 4 Jul; independent.co.uk, 6 Jul; althatisinteresting.com, 8 Jul; popularmechanics.com, 10 Jul* 2024.

Scotland's Spiritualist art

ALAN MURDIE examines the country's rich tradition of mediumistic art and psychic photography

COURTESY SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE CENTRE, EDINBURGH

ABOVE: "The Dawn of Peace" by Scottish artist Jane Stewart Smith now hangs in Edinburgh's Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Centre.

Hanging in the offices of the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Centre in Edinburgh is a striking painting entitled 'The Dawn of Peace'. It was the work of Jane Stewart Smith (1839-1925), a gifted and imaginative artist depicting her vision of the afterlife according to Spiritualist doctrines. The 21st century has seen a growing interest in Spiritualist art, with major exhibitions held at the Courtauld Institute in 2016, the Guggenheim in New York in 2018 and at Tate Modern in 2023.

Given the prominence of this painting in a working Spiritualist centre today, it was appropriate that earlier this year art historian Michelle Foot chose the Centre as the venue for the launch of her illuminating book *Modern Spiritualism and Scottish Art: Scots, Spirits and Seances 1860-1940*. This first in-depth study of Scottish Spiritualist art separates such works into two types. One is art focusing on the topic, depicting ethereal contacts between the spiritual and material worlds, while the second is artwork actually produced by mediums and psychics themselves, often in trance states and attributed to discarnate entities. Scotland supplies numerous examples of both.

Mediumistic art seemingly offers at first instance one of the most compelling proofs for Spiritualism's claims, but it does involve manifestations that are exceedingly difficult to demonstrate under laboratory conditions. As Professor Bob Morris (1942-2004), the first holder of the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at Edinburgh University, observed in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts: "We know we can't ask an unsolicited group to come into our laboratory to 'be psychic' on demand. If psychic functioning were that easy to obtain we would have learned about it long ago and there would be no controversy" (cited in SPR President's Note by Donald West, *Paranormal Review*, July 1998). The creative abilities required to produce the greatest or most original artistic, literary and musical works are often considered to reside at a deeper level of consciousness than our everyday awareness, one that can rarely be accessed on demand or in clinical conditions.

Probably the earliest forms of psychic art we possess are in the form of rock paintings and petroglyphs. This is a

complex and controversial field, involving works produced in dreams and visions. Such shamanic art may be produced in trances induced by the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances known to indigenous communities, or by lengthy, elaborate rituals involving drumming, chanting and physical ordeals.

Potentially interesting overlaps between Native American practices and the spiritual beliefs of white settlers prior to the birth of Spiritualism have been noted (many mediums later claimed Native American spirit guides), but generally the movement is considered to have started with the mysterious raps of the Fox sisters in 1848. This was the moment that Scottish historian of the esoteric James Wood described as when "The gods came down to Earth again on 31 March 1848", rapping out messages at a humble cottage in Hydesville, New York State.

Mediumistic messages and beliefs proved rapidly contagious, with the range of manifestations soon expanding from rapping noises and levitating tables to spirit paintings and drawings. Such efforts were enthusiastically received and adjudged proof of spiritual interaction with the mortal world and life after death.

Spiritualism arrived in Scotland in the 1850s, with the country producing two of the most notable mediums of all time: Daniel Dunglas Home (1859-1883), never once detected in fraud, and Helen Duncan (1897-1956), who was twice convicted in the courts. Two of the greatest advocates and propagandists for Spiritualism also hailed from Scotland: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) and Arthur Findlay (1883-1964), who donated Stisted Hall in Essex to the Spiritualist National Union. So it is not surprising that there are plenty of examples of Scottish Spiritualist art to be found.

A particularly interesting individual was David Duguid of Glasgow (1832-1907), a cabinet maker and factory worker who became one of the most important and prolific psychic artists in Britain. His first spirit guides were two 17th century Dutch artists, a shadowy personality called 'Jan Steen' and 'Ruisdael', believed to be Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-1682). Duguid appeared, at the minimum, to imitate very well certain landscape paintings attributed to the latter.

LEFT: The Glasgow cabinet maker, artist and medium David Duguid.

> According to Hafed, "the Sun is inhabited by bright and glorious beings and all the planets are inhabited"

His third and most controversial guide was 'Hafed', a deceased Persian Prince and one of the Three Wise Men at the birth of Christ. Returning 1,900 years after his death, he allegedly collaborated in 46 séances between 1870 and 1871. A remarkable book, *Hafed, Prince of Persia: his experiences in Earth-Life and Spirit-Life, being spirit communications received through Mr David Duguid, the Glasgow trance-painting medium*, was compiled, illustrated by facsimiles of 45 drawings all considered "the direct work of spirits".

On reading it today, embarrassment arises when Hafed switches from discussing art to pronouncing on geophysics and astronomy, following a woeful mediumistic fashion for speculating about the denizens of other worlds. According to Hafed, the Earth is a hollow sphere, though not inhabited on the inside or open at its poles (contrary to what some later flying saucer buffs claimed), but "the Sun is inhabited by bright and glorious beings [and]... all the planets are inhabited." He also declared the Moon possessed both animal and vegetable life. Regarding plant life on the Moon, this did not sound quite so absurd in 1870, given suggestions that it could sustain rudimentary vegetation were made as late as 1921 by the astronomer William Henry Pickering (1858-1938). With experiments in 2022 establishing that plants can be grown in lunar soil, perhaps an apologist might argue Hafed foresaw a colonised Moon of the future!

Fortunately, the artwork in the book was more impressive than Hafed's quasi-scientific pronouncements, (though what would a Persian astrologer from two millennia ago have speculated about the heavens?)

More pertinently, no one seems to have asked just why an ancient Persian artist would produce drawings in the precise and formalised style of a 19th century illustrator. That was at least until the discovery of some of Duguid's imagery closely matching pictures appearing in a contemporary popular work, Cassell's illustrated *Family Bible*. The resemblances were so close that Cassells sued Duguid for copyright infringement. The case was settled out of court by the withdrawal of the first edition of *Hafed, Prince of Persia*. It dented Duguid's reputation, but did not signal the end of his career.

Was Duguid a fraud? This is not so simple a question as it might seem at first instance. Remembering Charles Fort's line "No-one is a complete imposter", various possibilities present themselves regarding Duguid's state of mind.

Obviously, one is that Duguid and mediums like him were quicksilver tricksters, dishonest from start to finish, deliberately duping Spiritualists and

ABOVE: (left to right) Andrew Glendinning and James Robertson photographed with a psychic portrait of 'Hafed'. One of David Duguid's drawings of 'Hafed' from his book *Hafed, Prince of Persia*. Duguid with another of his spirit guides, 'Rosabelle'. **BELOW**: An 'Indian Temple' in another of Duguid's *Hafed* drawings.

the wider public. Evidence for out-and-out deceit by Duguid is not strong. Many observers considered Duguid's work as inexplicable by normal means. In séances he worked with his eyes closed, though often in darkness, potentially suspicious in itself (in contrast to Daniel Home, who almost uniquely performed in good light and condemned "dark séances, puppet shows, and third-rate jugglery" (in his *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*, 1877).

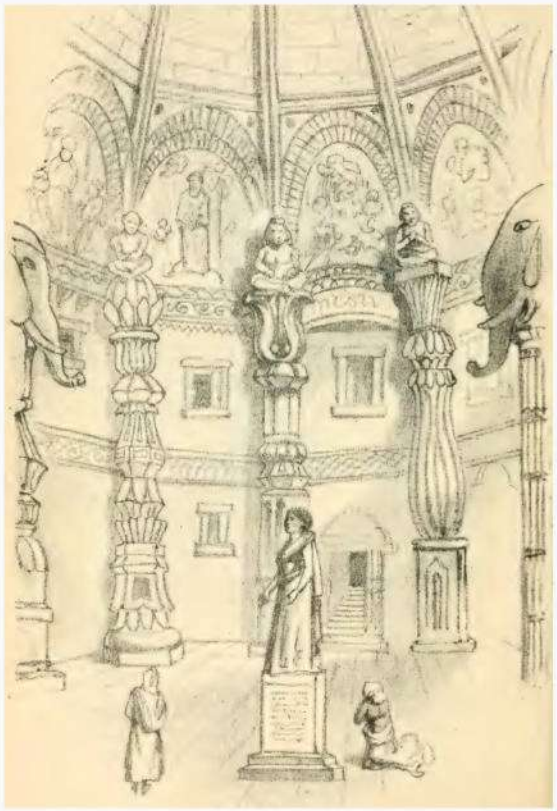
Alternatively, Duguid was perhaps a talented and self-taught amateur, capable of producing a flow of competent imitations or caricatures of existing artworks from memory (consciously or unconsciously), which he recklessly ascribed to spirit intervention or allowed Spiritualist believers to label as such. Cryptoamnesia might be postulated; a 1963 case involving musical copyright accepted unconscious copying might be a potential explanation.

A third possibility is that Duguid was fully convinced discarnate entities guided his hands, and innocently believed it himself.

Whichever might apply, fundamental problems still exist in assessing whether artistic works can constitute proof of spirit intervention and identity.

If no comparable work is shown to exist, the medium will be deemed to have created it as an original work, alone and with no external help. Or, if you make copies coming close to the known artistic works of an old master, they may be felt to be suggestive ('in the style of'), but insufficient to prove identity. Comparing the productions of mediums generating literary, artistic and musical works attributed to deceased masters, critics and experts often blithely remark how their creative abilities show a marked post-mortem deterioration in quality. But, equally, if too exact a match arises with any existing work, the medium is then accused of simply copying an original. Today's multimedia world makes it exceedingly hard to show that any particular person was not exposed to a particular image, melody or gem of information. And how can one ultimately prove what occurred within the brain and nervous system of the medium?

> Many observers considered Duguid's work as inexplicable by normal means



Duguid's career still flourished after the Cassells action. He branched out into spirit photography, which soon had the less visually sophisticated audience of the day in its thrall. Nonetheless, his images received endorsement from J Traill Taylor, founder of the Edinburgh Photographic Society, though Taylor observed: "The psychic figures behaved badly. Some were in focus, others not so. Some were lighted from the right, while the sitters were so from the left. Some were comely, others not so. Some monopolised the major position on the plate obliterating the material sitters.

Others were as an atrociously vignetted portrait, or one cut oval out of a photograph by a can-opener or equally bad clipped out held up behind the sitter."

Nonetheless, faith in Duguid endured.

Psychical researcher Harry Price claimed in 1942 that in an early séance investigation in 1905 he apprehended Duguid concealing a pre-prepared painting in his trousers. Price was markedly anti-Spiritualist and not always reliable; indeed, it is alleged that in 1932 he falsely implicated the gifted teenage medium Rudi Schneider in chicanery after the young psychic picked another researcher to work with.

For her part, Michelle Foot sensibly avoids attempting any resolution of these problems of origin and subjectivity posed by Duguid and other mediums; the English courts have maintained a similar stance. In *Cummins v Bond* (1927; 1 Ch 167), medium Geraldine Cummins disputed the copyright ownership of scripts she wrote in trance while researcher Frederick Bligh Bond edited them afterwards. Both parties believed the writings – which became a book – came from a discarnate presence named Cleophas, mentioned in the New Testament (though Bond argued telepathy as an alternative explanation). Mr Justice Eve declared himself unable to decide whether any spirit lay behind the writings, awarding copyright to the medium since she held the pen, even if entranced at the time.

These issues surfaced again in the failed prosecution of artist and self-confessed forger Tom Keating (1917-1984) in 1979. Standing trial at the Old Bailey along with art dealer David Lionel Evans, Keating gave evidence about how he produced his impressive fakes. He stated: "Sometimes my pastiches were so good I can say with all due modesty that there was some curious combination with the old master [Goya] himself... Some painters say it is Spiritualism. I am not a Spiritualist but there were times when the master came down and took over the painting. It was terribly difficult to tell the difference between his work and my own." Unfortunately, the merits of this defence were never tested and no verdict reached as the trial was abandoned on grounds of Keating's ill-health.

Duguid is just one fascinating case history examined by Michelle Foot, whose book stops at 1940. She also demonstrates how Spiritualist painting and imagery exerted a wider influence on mainstream Scottish artistic life. As well as in paintings, certain Spiritualist motifs are detectable in public Scottish commemorative sculpture, reaching an apogee in the National War Memorial (1917-1927) at Edinburgh Castle. I do hope a further scholarly volume will follow.

CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: At a sitting in Glasgow a female spirit is photographed in front of two sitters, with Scottish medium David Duguid providing the psychic energy required.

In the meantime, I was inspired to delve further into the 'Duguid-Hafed' story post-1940 and found several curious reports.

After Duguid died, his artworks were dispersed and the originals of most were lost. The spirit of Duguid himself allegedly manifested at some séances, but a far more regular visitor was his guide, Hafed. In December 1945 fascinating claims appeared in *Psychic News* that during the previous 11 years a spirit called 'Hafed' or 'Hafiz' had communicated through different mediums. First, a Mrs Robins, who attended Spiritualist circles in London, felt inspired to draw a portrait of a Middle Eastern gentleman in a turban. Mrs Robins declared she had never had an art lesson in her life. Then the names 'Hafed' and 'Hafiz' emerged in a voice séance delivered by well-known medium Leslie Flint. In 1942 another medium, a Mrs Lilian Bailey, recognised Mrs Robins's portrait as a spirit guide who had spoken through her a dozen times since 1930. Then, nearly 50 years later in the 1990s, Duguid's Hafed reportedly dropped in again, this time inspiring a psychic artist named Ronald Wright in Essex. Wright went on to publish a book about these communications.

With deserved attention coming to the subject of Spiritualist art, it would not surprise me looking forward if we go on to hear more about 'Hafed' from among the many practitioners of psychic art active in the world today.

Sources: Nandor Fodor, *These Mysterious People* (1932); *Alpha* magazine (July 1979); *Psychic News* (2 Feb 1933, 29 Dec 1945, 12 Jan 1946, 20 Nov 1993, 10 Mar 2007). Harry Price, *The Search for Truth* (1942); Anita Gregory, *The Strange Case of Rudi Schneider* (1985).

KARL SHUKER says hello to a super-sized snake and an eye-catching big cat

ABOVE LEFT: *Eunectes akayima*, the newly discovered and largest known species of snake. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Tanzania's rare strawberry leopard.

MEGA-SNAKE IS MEGA-FIND!

It's not every day that a newly discovered species of living snake also turns out to be the world's largest known species of living snake – but that is what happened earlier this year. And to make its discovery even more amazing, this mega-snake had actually been hiding in plain sight all along! In 2022, while filming in the Amazon rainforest an episode of the TV show *Pole To Pole*, in which Hollywood actor Will Smith explores in each episode a different biome (a large biological community whose wildlife is adapted to a specific climate, e.g. rainforest), a team of scientists working with the show took samples from green anacondas in the region's northern basin. These are known to be the world's largest anacondas, and therefore the world's largest living snakes of any kind, some specimens measuring over 20ft (6m) long and possibly weighing up to 1,100lb (500kg).

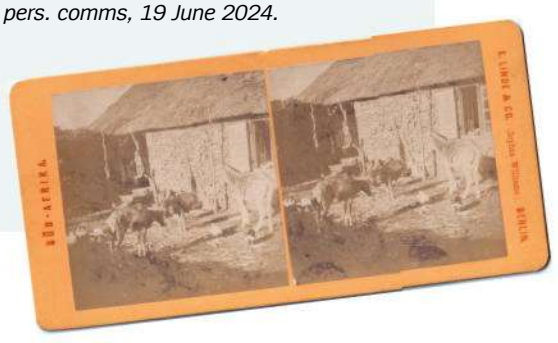
To their great surprise, however, when the scientists analysed these samples they discovered that the northern green anaconda differed genetically from the southern green anaconda by 5.5 per cent – to put this difference into context, humans and chimpanzees differ from each other genetically by only approximately 2 per cent. In short (unlike the northern green anaconda, which is anything but short!), therefore, the northern green anaconda merited in the scientists' view being reclassified as a distinct new species, which in February 2024 was formally dubbed *Eunectes akayima* (its species name deriving from a local Cariban language term for snake, coupled with a suffix denoting largeness). However, not all herpetological researchers are in favour of this taxonomic splitting, voicing concern that the genetic markers upon which it is based may not be sufficiently reliable. Nevertheless, the northern green anaconda's discrete status is presently accepted by most snake specialists, meaning that at least for now, a once-cryptic species of mega-snake is cryptic no longer. *www.thedodo.com/daily-dodo/new-species-of-giant-reptile-discovered-while-filming-will-smith-show; www.sciencetimes.com/articles/48828/20240221/26-foot-long-anaconda-discovered-amazon-rainforest-world-s-biggest.htm*

STRAWBERRY LEOPARD SEEN

It may not be a pink panther, but the strawberry leopard recently reported from Tanzania is nothing if not eye-catching. This is a rare colour morph of the leopard, in which the black rosette coat markings characterising normal specimens of this big cat species are reddish-pink or brown instead, giving the animal a faded look. Until now, strawberry leopards were thought to be wholly confined to the Central Bushveld bioregion of South Africa. An adult female, the Tanzanian individual was photographed on five separate occasions by two different trail camera traps between August and November 2021 in Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve, but its existence has only now been made public. Its coat markings' aberrant strawberry coloration is thought to be caused by a mutation in the tyrosinase-related protein (TYRP1) gene, and may well be the result of inbreeding within the Selous leopard population in which it was recorded. An alternative but far less likely option is that it resulted from the migration northward to Tanzania of South African leopards carrying the strawberry mutant gene allele, but this would involve vast distances for any such individuals to travel. *https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ece3.11542; www.iflscience.com/rare-strawberry-leopard-spotted-in-tanzanian-game-reserve-for-first-time-75194*

QUAGGA QUOTA INCREASE?

Recently (**FT446:24**) I documented the exciting if highly unexpected news that a long-lost photographic slide of a living quagga (below), snapped in 1864 by German physician Dr Gustav Fritsch and depicting a South African captive specimen of this soon-to-become-extinct, half-striped zebra form, recently discovered, and purchased, on eBay! Its discoverer, Dutch painter Jasper Hulshoff Pol, had originally planned to search eBay after learning that a quagga photo had been listed more than a century earlier in an 1878 catalogue, but what I hadn't realised when writing my previous quagga report is that after also obtaining details of the Fritsch photo-slide, Pol had decided to search for that one instead, and that is what he found. So this found quagga photo-slide was not the catalogue-listed one, the latter being an entirely separate, second quagga photo that may remain unknown to modern-day science. In short, therefore, an additional 19th-century quagga photo-image might well be still awaiting rediscovery somewhere, and if eventually found could increase the known quota of quagga photos even further. Thrilling times ahead, perhaps, for scourers of eBay and other auction sites? *Jasper Hulshoff Pol, pers. comms, 19 June 2024.*



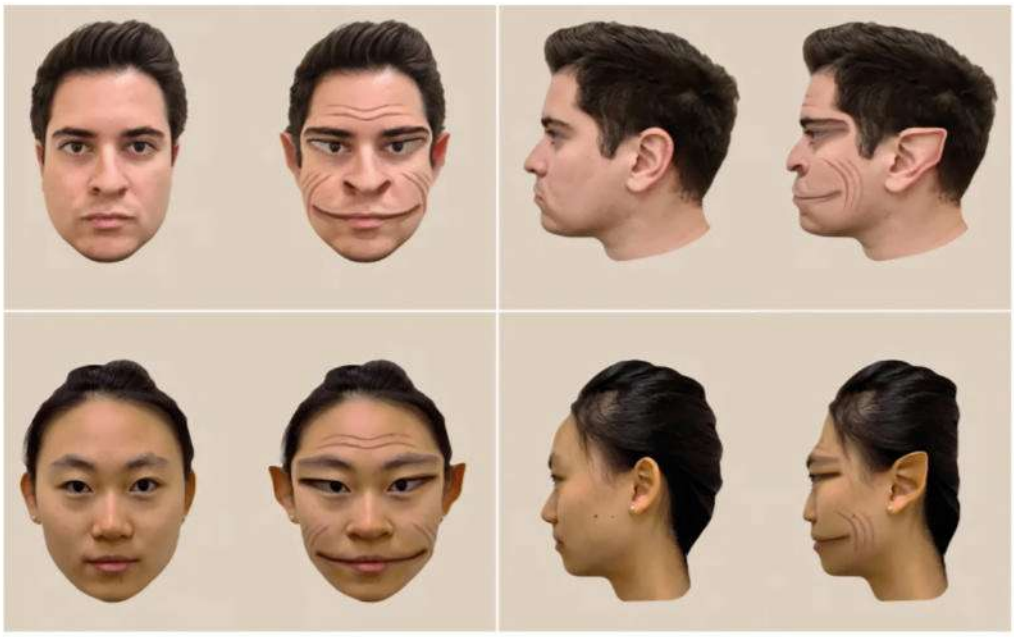
MEDICAL BAG

This month's odd complaints include everyone around you turning into demons, computer-related ED and possibly the most horrific sneeze ever...

DEMON HAUNTED WORLD

In November 2020, Victor Sharrah, 59, of Clarksville, Tennessee, realised something had gone very wrong with his world; suddenly, everyone around him looked demonic. Their ears, noses and mouths were stretched back, and there were deep grooves in their foreheads, cheeks and chins. "My first thought was I woke up in a demon world," said Sharrah. "You can't imagine how scary it was". Tipped off by a friend who taught visually impaired people and suspected he was suffering from prosopometamorphopsia (PMO), Sharrah consulted neurologists, who, after tests, confirmed the diagnosis.

This is an extremely rare neurological perception disorder that causes faces to appear distorted in shape, size, texture or colour and usually lasts for a few days or weeks, although on rare occasions can persist for years. There are fewer than 100 cases on record and researchers believe the distortions are caused by a dysfunction in the brain network that handles facial processing. Cases have been linked to head trauma, stroke, epilepsy or migraines, but some people have PMO without any obvious cause. In Sharrah's case it may have been triggered by carbon monoxide poisoning he had suffered several months before the symptoms started, or by a head injury he had suffered when he was 43. As the distortions Sharrah saw only appeared when he was looking at people in person and not in photographs or on screen, this enabled researchers at Dartmouth College to create a digital representation of what Sharrah had been experiencing by getting him to describe the differences between photographs of people's faces and the same person standing in front of him, then using image-editing software to modify the pictures to match Sharrah's description. PMO researcher Brad Duchaine thinks the disorder is underdiagnosed because experiencers "don't tell anybody or tell very few people about it, because they're afraid of what others are going to think." Not all PMO sufferers see faces in the same way as Sharrah; Duchaine has come across people who see drooping faces, a woman who sees people as having two faces, one in front of the other, and someone who sees "witch-like" faces with long noses and pointy ears. *nbcnews.com, 22 Mar 2024.*



ANTÓNIO MELLO / THE LANCET

ABOVE: These "demonic" faces, with distorted features show what a prosopometamorphopsia sufferer might see.

BLESS YOU!

While having breakfast with his wife at a Florida diner to celebrate his clean bill of health following abdominal surgery, a 63-year-old man coughed and sneezed at the same time. Immediately afterwards he felt a sharp pain and a "wet" sensation and on lifting his shirt found that his colon was hanging out of his surgical wound. Doctors had told him the incision had healed well, but when the ambulance arrived paramedics found a three-inch opening in the man's abdomen with "large amounts of bowel" hanging out. Luckily, the man suffered minimal blood loss and there was no damage to the exposed gut, so the hospital was able to stuff it back into his abdomen. They then gave him extra-strong figure-of-eight stitches, plus internal and external stitching and stiches that penetrated multiple layers of the abdominal wall to be sure his innards stay put in future. Dehiscence, in which a surgical wound reopens, is thought to happen in three-in-100 people who have undergone abdominal and pelvic surgeries and is fatal for four in 10 patients due to excessive blood loss and injury to the organs that have been exposed. *metro.co.uk, 7 Jun 2024.*

GAME OFF

A study of more than 200,000 men carried out by researchers in China found that every hour spent playing video games in a day triples the risk of erectile dysfunction and low sperm count. They studied men as they went about leisure activities such as watching TV, going for a drive, or playing computer games, measuring their sex hormones as well as any feelings of depression and anxiety. They found that every 1.2 hours per day spent playing video games or doing other leisure activities at the computer triples the risk of erectile dysfunction (ED) but that there "was no evidence to suggest that watching television or driving for leisure" had a similar effect, leading them to conclude that it wasn't just being sedentary that caused the problem.

Further investigation showed that computer use was linked to lower levels of follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) in the participants' blood, a hormone that works alongside testosterone to stimulate sperm production. As well as low sperm production, low FSH levels have been linked to decreased libido, infertility, and low energy. As they did not measure how severe the erectile dysfunction was or look for anything beyond a correlation, researchers could only conclude that the longer the time spent using a computer, the more likely ED was to occur. The number of men seeking treatment for ED has increased dramatically in the 21st century and it is estimated to currently affect about 30 million men in the US – almost twice as many as reported suffering from it in the early 2000s. *dailymail.co.uk, 20 Mar 2024.*

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS | Trump's ear, dead tortoise mystery solved, the Voynich Manuscript and other cryptic texts

MAXIM ELRAMSISY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Donald Trump with his eye-catching ear bandage.

TRUMP ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT [FT448:4-5, 42-45]

Inevitably, aliens have now become involved in the frenzy of rumour, conspiracy and mythologising surrounding the attempted assassination of Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania on 13 July. With multiple people subjecting public footage of the event to intense amateur scrutiny, several have claimed to see UFOs in the sky over the rally. Allegedly a disc-like object can be seen whizzing past the American flag on the stage just before the gunshots, while another UFO manifests as an orb above the scene as the Secret Service rush the stage.

Trump fans on social media have gone on to proclaim that these were "guardian angels" deflecting bullets from the former President, with a post on X (Twitter) claiming "UFO's [sic] are always at Trumps rally's [sic], protecting him". However, Enigma Lab's UAP advisor Alejandro Rojas said the objects were "most likely drones, birds, or a combination of both".

On the other hand, ufologist Mark Christopher Lee said: "It sounds a bit out there, but I do believe that this attempt may have been due to the fact that, if elected President again, Trump would release the full truth about UFOs," adding that the assassination attempt could also have been because someone wanted to stop Trump releasing information on an alleged affair between JFK and Marilyn Monroe.

Meanwhile, doubts have been raised as to exactly how close to death Trump came in Butler. While the Trump campaign insist that his ear wound was caused by a bullet, they have refused to share medical records from his treatment, or to allow medics who treated him to conduct a press briefing. Trump did share a letter from his personal doctor, Ronny Jackson, asserting he was hit by a bullet, although Jackson has previously raised eyebrows by issuing wildly optimistic reports of Trump's health status.

In his letter, Jackson said Trump had a 2cm (0.8in) wide gunshot wound in the right ear from a high-powered rifle. "There was initially significant bleeding, followed by marked swelling of the entire upper ear." At a subsequent event, Trump appeared with a large bandage over the ear, something that dedicated followers swiftly took to wearing too as a sign of solidarity. It was claimed that in photographs of Trump playing golf the previous day he was not wearing a bandage, and that his ear appeared to show no signs of injury; however, this turned out to be false, as the photos in question were actually taken in 2022.

At the House Judiciary Committee hearing on the assassination attempt, FBI Director Christopher Wray said, "There's some question about whether or not it's a bullet or shrapnel that hit his ear", causing Jackson to post on X "IT WAS A BULLET — I'VE SEEN THE WOUND! PATHETIC!!!" The FBI later attempted to clarify the matter with a statement saying, "What struck former President Trump in the ear was a bullet, whether whole or fragmented into smaller pieces", which nicely sits on the fence. *dailymail.co.uk, 24 Jul, time.com, 27 Jul 2024.*

CRYPTIC COMMUNICATIONS [FT442:4-5]

With advances in AI, the days of cryptanalysts poring for years over mysterious historical codes may be coming to an end. Linguist Beata Megyesi from Stockholm University in Sweden, with her colleagues Christiane Schaefer at Uppsala University and computer scientist Kevin Knight at the University of Southern California, have been working on an ambitious project called DECRYPT that uses computers to unravel impenetrable historical ciphers. "The dream is to be able to point your phone camera at a cipher and read it immediately," Megyesi says. They have already had success in using computers to break the Copiale cipher, which encrypts a 105-page manuscript dating from the 1730s. This turned out to contain details of the initiation rituals of a German secret society known as the Oculists that involved, among other things, new members being asked to read a blank piece of paper and having a single hair plucked from their eyebrow. This success led to DECRYPT, which attempts to combine AI and computer vision into a powerful system that can crack any code. The project has already produced CrypTool 2, created with Nils Kopal at the University of Siegen in Germany, which partially automates decryption, and aided by training data from encrypted documents in the Vatican library, the team has already cracked more than 2,500 ciphers. This includes one used by Mary Queen of Scots, described as "the most important new find on Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, for 100 years", but they have yet to get the computer vision aspect of the project to work. *newscientist.com, 18 Sept 2023.*

VOYNICH DECIPHERMENT [FT381:4]

Since its rediscovery in 1912 by Polish book dealer Wilfred Voynich, the strange script and illustrations in the early 15th century manuscript that now bears his name have defied decipherment (see also **FT130:42-46, 260:58-59, 345:38-43, 359:4**).

The latest attempt, by Keagan Brewer and Michelle L Lewis from Macquarie University in Australia, does not try and crack the weird text, but instead attempts to discern its subject and purpose based on the images and its context. Having scrutinised the drawings, Brewer believes the book is a gynæcological text, as it is full of drawings of naked women, many of whom seem to be pointing objects towards their crotches. "I cannot fathom why it would be about anything else given that

RSPA

ABOVE: Some of the dead Aldabra tortoises discovered in Devon earlier this year.

there are plants (which means it's a medical manuscript) and women pointing objects towards their vaginas," he says. "Many commentators on the manuscript ignore the latter fact, but they're right there for everyone to see".

One potential author for the Voynich is Bavarian physician Johannes Hartlieb, who studied gynæcology and who lived in the right place and time to have created the manuscript. He feared what women who knew how to control their bodies might do, so advocated only writing about such matters in code, with the Voynich manuscript being potentially the sole surviving example.

Brewer and Lewis also think that their analysis of the document's elaborate nine-part Rosette illustration backs their theory. "In late-mediæval times the uterus was believed to have seven chambers, and the vagina two openings," Brewer says, and they believe it illustrates "coitus and conception", coupled with an image of five flutes shooting off one of its circles. This, they feel refers to influential Persian physician Abu Bakr Al-Ra zi 's late mediæval claim that virgins had five veins in their vaginas. "What we hope to have demonstrated in this paper," they conclude "is that amid the abundance of gynæcological and sexological writing drawn up in late-mediæval Europe, there were large numbers of medical writers and readers who considered 'women's secrets,' or diverse aspects thereof, worthy of obscuration, sometimes in addition to other subjects such as alchemy, magic, and demons." *news.artnet.com, 15 May 2024.*

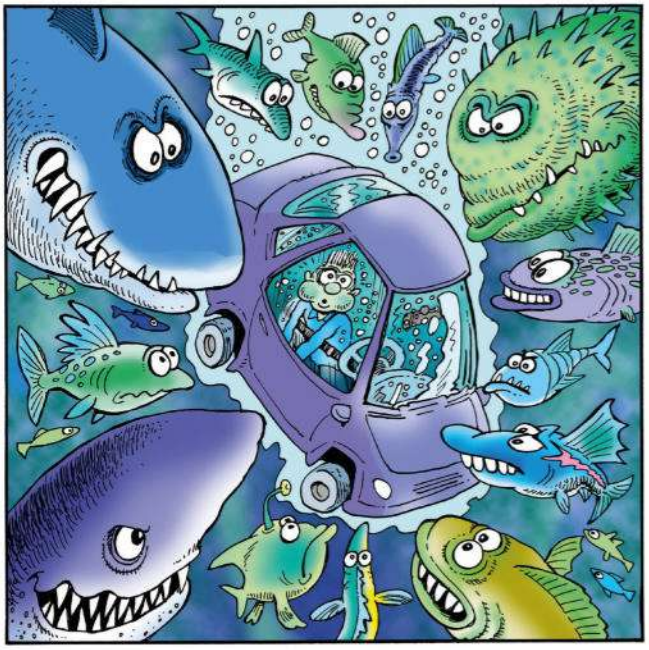
TORTOISE TERMINATOR [FT443:6-7]

Following the discovery of 10 dead Aldabra giant tortoises in Ashclyst Forest in Devon between January and March this year, police arrested electrician Gary Priddle, 56, from Exeter after a tip-off from a member of the public who remembered seeing tortoises on his property during a house viewing. When they interviewed him, he admitted owning and disposing of the dead reptiles. Priddle, who had a large collection of rare tortoises, had spent the period between 23 and 29 December last year celebrating Christmas and during that time had not checked on his animals. As a result, he did not realise that the tortoises' heating system had failed and that many of them had died of cold. He then disposed of the bodies by secretly dumping them in the forest. This led to a second charge, which states that he "threw down, dropped or otherwise deposited litter, namely 10 deceased Aldabra tortoises, and left it in East Devon". Police seized 13 adult tortoises and 40 younger ones from Priddle's home, one of which later died, and in court he pleaded guilty to charges under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Environmental Protection Act 1990. He was sentenced to a community order of 50 hours unpaid work and a £199 fine and banned from owning, keeping, looking after or purchasing tortoises for 10 years. *BBC News, 28 May; dailymail.co.uk, 30 May 2024.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

283: SUBMERGED CAR



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

If you're in a car that's sinking, don't panic – just wait until the vehicle fills with water, so that the pressure inside is the same as the pressure outside. You'll then be able to open the doors.

The "truth"

All safety authorities agree that this myth, presumably derived from adventure novels and TV thrillers, is dangerous. By the time the interior contains enough water to allow the door to open, there will be little or no air left. You'd need to be capable of agility and clear thinking while holding your breath for a prolonged period, and of acting very quickly. In some parts of the world drowning in a car is a surprisingly frequent cause of death, so it's probably worth noting the experts' advice – which boils down to "Don't wait, act." While the car is sinking, but not yet sunk (a period of up to a minute), your first priority is getting out of your seatbelt, by cutting it if necessary. Next, get the window open; again, you've only got seconds during which this will be possible. If the window won't open, electrically or manually, then you need to smash it. Have a specialist car-escape tool, for use on seatbelts and windows – and make sure you know where it is.

Sources

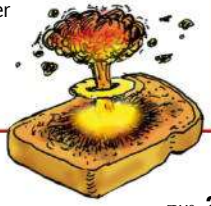
www.popularmechanics.com/cars/a34236818/how-to-escape-a-submerged-car/; www.royallifesavingwa.com.au/your-community/your-safety/out-and-about/escaping-a-sinking-vehicle; www.toyotaoforlando.com/blog/how-to-escape-a-sinking-car-what-you-need-to-know/

Disclaimer

As an absolute last resort the equalisation method might be worth a go, but only if you've run out of any more sensible options. Unless any reader knows better?

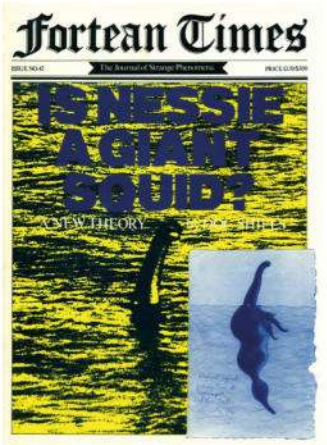
Mythchaser

Do you remember when burnt toast caused cancer? You surely will if you're of a particular generation, recalling your gran scrupulously scraping off the black bits. The idea went out of fashion, as health scares always do, but an FT reader was recently told by her oncologist that it's back in. Since, she says, burnt bits are the best bits, she urgently needs to know if he's right.



NECROLOG

This month, we bid a fond farewell to Tony 'Doc' Shiels, the Wizard of the West, whose surreal monster-raising exploits made him a regular fixture in FT



LEFT: Tony 'Doc' Shiels, magician. **ABOVE:** Shiels's iconic Nessie photo on the cover of Fortean Times 42. **BELOW:** One of the Morgawr photos that appeared in the *Falmouth Packet* and later in FT.

TONY 'DOC' SHIELS

The artist-magician Tony 'Doc' Shiels has died at the age of 84. A regular in the pages of *Fortean Times*, especially in the early days, he was a true original, his life and work brewed from a heady mix of daring showmanship, Gothic surrealism, Celtic storytelling, blues piano, art, laughter and Guinness.

He was born Anthony Nicol Shiels in 1938. Brought up in Blackpool, he adopted the title 'Doc' in 1970 while working in Cornwall as a stage magician. Here he spent several years performing elaborate – and at times gory – magic shows with trusted friends and family. The stage name became an alter-ego with which he had a somewhat love-hate relationship. Friends tended to call him Tony, but to the public, and particularly to readers of FT, he is and will probably ever more be known as 'Doc' Shiels.

This was the name with which he made the first of many FT appearance in April 1976, when the magazine was still known as *The News*. Editor Bob Rickard had received a series of letters from Shiels describing the sea-monster of Falmouth, now known as 'Morgawr', then referred to as 'the Durgan Dragon'. As Bob put it: "Tony Doc Shiels, The Wizard of the West, was kind enough to write to us with some background info" (**FT15:13, 15-16**)

The first two pics of Morgawr had been published in the *Falmouth Packet* newspaper on 5 March 1976. They were small and grainy, and looked like elephant heads, but they prompted a huge number of compelling eye-witness reports. Shiels told Bob that he intended to organise a hunt for the dragon – "his plan is to raise the monster by making psychic contact with it"– and he was joined in this enterprise by the American Prof Mike McCormick, with the two of them appearing on BBC TV shortly after.

In the following issue (**FT16:17-19**) Bob relayed more news from Cornwall. There had been further sightings of the sea monster, and Shiels planned to recruit some nude witches to join him in the hunt. Intriguingly, these latest missives also included a drawing, and reports, of a

strange 'bird-man' seen by two girls that Easter weekend hovering over the church tower at Mawnan. Issue 17 reported on more sightings of this 'Owlman' (**FT17:15-20**), while issue 19 devoted six pages to Morgawr (**FT19:12-17**). Issue 21, meanwhile, reported on the 'Monstermind' experiment (**FT21:27-30**), as organised by Shiels, which was an attempt to raise water monsters across the world by the PSI (Psychic Seven International) group of psychics using 'telepathic summoning'.

Then, in the summer of 1977, FT reported on Shiels's visit to Loch Ness, and printed images of Nessie, purportedly taken by him whilst he was visiting Scotland (**FT22:23-26**). His pictures, which also appeared on the front page of the *Daily Mirror* newspaper, were subsequently examined by Arizona's Ground Saucer Watch, and when their authenticity was questioned, Bob Rickard, in a later edition of the magazine, jumped to Shiels's defence.

Shiels and his exploits, which included a play written with Ken Campbell, continued to feature in the magazine and at FT UnConventions for several more years. Indeed, in the early 1980s Shiels had a column of sorts, which was typically lively and engaging, entitled 'Words from the Wizard'. Fortean Tomes also published the book *Monstrum*, arguably his 'magnum opus', in 1990.

If the Shiels monsters were hoaxes, as many seem to believe,

they were very elaborate and cleverly conceived. Certainly entertaining and charismatic, Doc Shiels and his exploits, are fondly remembered by many. But, as I have said, Shiels's own relationship with this larger-than-life character 'Doc Shiels, the Wizard of the West' was ambivalent, and became more so towards the end of his life.

Tony Shiels trained as an artist, and first came to Cornwall in 1958 drawn, like many others, to St Ives because of its reputation as a progressive, modernist art colony. For a while Shiels ran a gallery there, showing the work of his friend the Minimalist Bob Law, for example. He also took Barbara Hepworth's place on the committee of the famous Penwith Society.

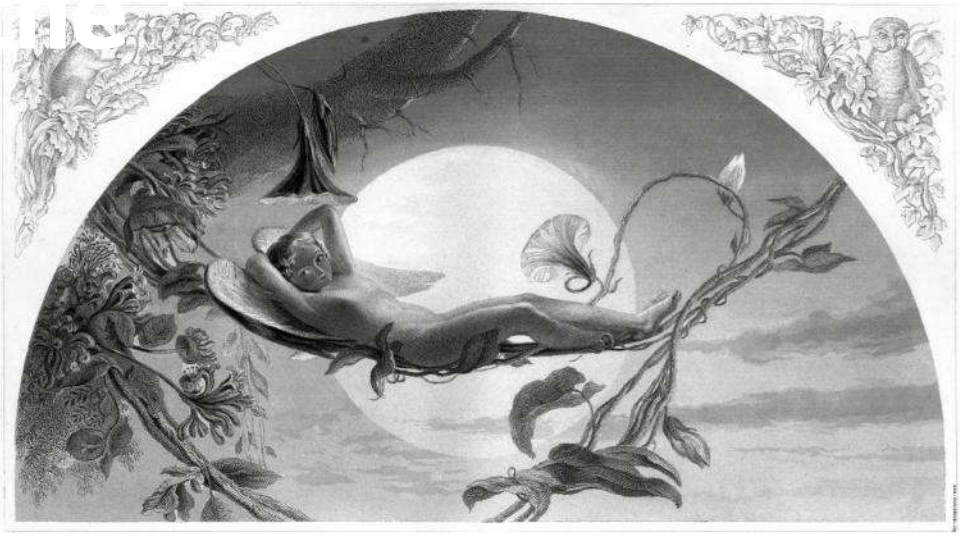
After leaving Cornwall and moving to southern Ireland in 1993 (to the 'Nnidnid Estate', as he amusingly called it – *Nnidnid* being the name of a Surrealist magazine he produced in the 1980s), he continued to draw and paint every day, and remained devoted to the idea of art to the end of his life. As he grew older, and less able to make large paintings, he would decorate beermats in his own playful, irreverent style, and sell them, as well as give them to friends.

Shiels worried that his fortean activities, and his identity as 'Doc Shiels' would eclipse his identity as a painter: that "it would banjax his career", as he once put it to me. Yet his 'career', and his career-path, were completely unique. He broke all the rules. His art, his personality and his monster-hunting were, in the end, all as one and they cannot – and need not – be separated.

A permanent exhibition dedicated to Tony 'Doc' Shiels's life and work has now opened in Falmouth, Cornwall, at 'Gwithti An Pystri, the Cabinet of Folklore and Magic'.

Tony 'Doc' Shiels, artist, magician, monster-raiser and writer, born Salford 25 May 1938; died County Kerry, Ireland, 11 July 1924, aged 84.

Rupert White



Fairies, Folklore and Forteana

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

EAT YOUR BEANS

I have just had great news. John Clark's book *The Green Children of Woolpit* (Exeter University Press) is out. It's not only a superlative study of one of Britain's first fortean mysteries, but also a bit of FT history. The author first read about the Green Children three decades ago in this very magazine (**FT57:39, 41**).

The Green Children were two infants that turned up in East Anglia in the 12th century and were considered to be fairies by locals. They allegedly had green skin, though the green faded. The children's arrival in Woolpit was recorded by two different writers, within a half century of the kids unaccountably appearing. We have all kinds of theories about who the Green Children were (a range of ethnicities, fairies and aliens have been suggested). But it would be a brave historian who claimed that the whole thing was just made up.

One aspect that might give us the key to their origins is the children's diet. They refused to eat what was given them and began to suffer from hunger. "At last, when some beans, newly cut with their stalks on, were carried into the house, they made signs with great eagerness that some of the beans should be given to them. When the beans were brought, they opened the stalks, not the bean pods, thinking that the beans were contained in the hollow of the stalks. But when they didn't find beans in the stalks they began to cry again. When the bystanders noticed this, they opened the pods and showed them the naked beans. Once they were shown them, they ate them with great joy, and would touch no other food at all for a long time."

> "ONCE THEY WERE SHOWN THEM, THEY ATE THE FOOD WITH GREAT JOY, AND WOULD TOUCH NO OTHER FOOD AT ALL"

There have been attempts to explain the children's condition in terms of 'favism', a rare (in 12th-century Britain) allergy to fava beans that involves hallucinations (among a host of unpleasant symptoms). But it seems doubtful – even with associated anæmia – that the children's skin would have turned light green after eating beans (there is much in John's book on medical conditions and green pallor). In any case, the children were described as being green when they arrived.

Fava beans were associated with misperception and madness in British folklore. Is this nothing more than British storytellers trying to communicate that the children were 'other'? Possibly, but the scene sounds like a snapshot from their acculturation. Were the children (this is my wild speculation) from a continental or even Middle Eastern Jewish background? Perhaps they'd had it hammered into them that they couldn't eat gentile food and here, finally, was something they were familiar with…

Simon has just brought out, with Davide Ermacora, *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and Other Social Supernatural Beings: European Traditions*.

Fragments of reality

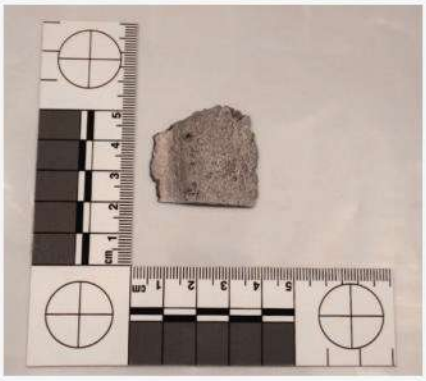
NIGEL WATSON finds the Betty and Barney Hill abduction in the spotlight, plus tales of cosmic debris

STAGED

Disclosure advocate Dr Steven Greer put the cat among the pigeons when in a podcast he stated: "The Betty and Barney Hill abduction was a staged, man-made abduction, having nothing to do with aliens."

Kathleen Marden, the niece of Betty Hill, responded with these questions:

1. What technology did the USAF have in 1961, that could hover silently, rotate, and bounce back and forth like a 'yoyo'?
2. How do you explain more than a dozen eye witnesses to the craft?
3. What did they lower from the craft's underside as it hovered only 100 feet above Barney, as reported in the earliest documents and sketched by Barney on 20 September 1961?
4. What technology had they developed that produced buzzing tones on the trunk of their car and caused the car to vibrate as their craft hovered above the Hills' 1957 Chevy? Why did it induce partial amnesia? Why did it leave a magnetic field around shiny quarter sized concentric circles on their trunk that had not been there the previous day?
5. What wand had this nefarious group developed that could immobilize people and cause them to float above the ground?
6. Where did they obtain the telepathic, hairless, non-human, large chested people of short stature with large craniums and very thin arms and legs, who conducted intrusive examinations on the Hills?
7. What was the reason for their insertion of a large needle into Betty's navel years before doctors used this procedure for use in a hospital setting? And why did it leave fluid that a scientist evaluated as DNA from her body on the lining of her dress that did not bleed through to the exterior of her dress?
8. Why did they deposit Tellurium and Rhodium, rare and expensive metals, on Betty's dress? Tellurium is extremely rare in the Earth's crust but abundant in the Universe. Rhodium is one of the rarest and most valuable precious metals on Earth with a higher melting point and lower density than platinum.
9. How could Betty accurately sketch a star map based on information that was not known to anyone on Earth in 1961? A recent update, with a focus on exoplanets of 2289 different models indicates that the Fish identification remains the closest match of nearest stars.
10. The scientific analysis of symbols observed by abductees on craft indicates that they are nearly identical. Betty sketched these nearly identical symbols as well.



11. What right did they have to violate the human rights of two upstanding American civilians in a Nazi-like experiment? And why have they done this, with impunity, to thousands of families around the world? *www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ii7M1pcOzW4*

BETTY'S BITS

One lesser known fact about the Hill case is that Betty said she actually owned fragments from a UFO crash long before her abduction. In a 1987 interview at her home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, she told Swedish ufologist Clas Svahn that in the late 1950s: "I was over here in Maine, visiting with the family. And it was a warm night and we were sitting outdoors on the porch. When we saw what we thought at that time was a plane (moving) slowly going across the sky.

"And while we're watching it, it exploded in mid-air, and burned. Now, listen, now, we've seen a plane blow up, we turned on the radio, we turned on the TV. Nothing. Wow… My nephew had seen this burning debris come down from the sky. And he watched it, and when it cooled off, he got some of that. And my sister gave some pieces to me, and said that we don't know what it is."

She put the pieces in her closet, hoping to find someone who could analyse them, but failing to do so she ended up throwing them in her back garden where they were covered in sand.

Only a few days after burying the debris Betty and Barney had their famous abduction encounter on 19 September 1961, and the craft they saw looked just like the one that had exploded years earlier. Her conclusion was that she was abducted because "they" knew she had the crash debris.

In her book, *A Common Sense Approach to UFOs* (self-published, 1995) she does not mention the crash sighting, but does mention being given several handfuls of metal recovered from where a UFO was seen landing. On showing them to some top ranking military officers they were shocked because they said this material was top secret. In the light of these and similar extraordinary claims, sceptic Robert Sheaffer is of the opinion that Betty "just made shit up." *www.ufo.se/index.php/bhill; alienexpanse.com/index.php?threads/more-reasons-to-believe-betty-hill-had-mental-issues.2823/*

LEFT: The alleged Roswell specimen sent for analysis to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

OAK RIDGE NATIONAL LABORATORY

MATERIALS UNKNOWN

A magnesium-bismuth fragment allegedly recovered from the 1947 Roswell UFO crash was sent to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in 2022 for analysis. Hal Puthoff, when a member of the To The Stars Academy, claimed it was made of metamaterial and was "an excellent microscopic waveguide for very high frequency electromagnetic radiation terahertz frequencies." The Laboratory has now concluded it was manufactured terrestrially, but they could not determine its intended purpose.

Meanwhile, geologist Frank Kimbler has discovered 20 very small "UFO" fragments at Roswell, and initial analysis claims some are 100 per cent aluminium that is described as "compelling evidence" for the crash.

At the MUFON International Symposium held on 14 July 2024, Ron James and Bob Spearing in the "presentation of the year" claimed they had analysed a "non-terrestrial" fragment using NASA-grade technology. It is a porous and extremely light specimen that is 90 per cent unidentifiable.

The providence of the fragment is highly dubious as it was sent to MUFON by "Arkady", a Russian researcher, who said it "appeared" in his house and that he was told by a non-human entity that it came from a crashed UFO. To add a bit more mystery to the story a previous sample posted to Spearing got "stolen" from his mailbox. Despite our doubts the fragment is being sent for further analysis. *www.aaro.mil/Portals/136/PDFs/Information%20Papers/ORNL-Synopsis_Analysis_of_a_Metallic_Specimen.pdf; www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-13544475/New-evidence-Roswell-UFO-spacecraft-crash-1947-Discovery-Alien-Encounters.html; www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-13640699/UFO-hunters-possession-debris-alien.html; www.jasoncolavito.com/blog/a-potential-solution-to-the-mystery-of-the-alien-metal-promoted-by-to-the-stars*

Star Dreamers

JENNY RANDLES reflects on the part creativity plays in cases of alien contact – and alien memories

Back when I used to travel the world to appear at conferences I had a particularly interesting time in the desert in Phoenix, Arizona. I met some fascinating people, including a key witness to the Rendlesham Forest incident who refocused my view on that extraordinary affair. However, that is not what I want to talk about.

It was here that I first discovered the concept of 'Star Children'. I had not come across the term before, but realised that I had met a few of these kindred spirits back in the UK, without appreciating this was a global phenomenon. Star Children are not just close encounter witnesses or abductees. They go one step beyond. Some actually believed they had not just met aliens, but had actually once *been* aliens living on a distant planet and then sent here to Earth to 'incarnate' in a terrestrial body as some kind of galactic missionary. This was a million light years away from investigating a fuzzy blob in the sky, and I was sceptical – until I actually started to talk with some of them. I discovered, to my surprise, they were not obviously any crazier than your average witness telling me about that light in the sky near an airport that was *not* the landing beacon on an aircraft. This Star Child idea was something I needed to understand.

So what did I discover? That many people believed a nearby desert location called Sedona was a spiritual 'city' where possible alien influence had created a place of healing. It was a pretty place, surrounded by red rocks, and it did feel unusual. But the shops that had created a cottage industry there could, of course, have started a self-fulfilling prophecy of the 'if you build it, they will come' variety. However, I was not going to criticise a town from maximising its opportunity to attract visitors. At worst, it was just entrepreneurial and for all I knew could have some real vibes I couldn't pick up on.

I came across a woman from Kansas who claimed that, before she was actually born, her parents were told she was going to be a special child – an emissary. The message was delivered by an alien who appeared on their farm beneath a hovering UFO.

As a child, she wasn't told about this prophecy; she only learned of it when she was 29, by then married with young children, and saw a UFO. It was hovering over the road ahead and emitted a beam of light; in the blink of the eye, she and her family were driving into a town two hours distant. Only later, under regression hypnosis, did she discover her mission and that the car and other family members on the journey were 'beamed up' and then relocated nearer to their destination. That mission was to be some kind of go-between for humans and aliens, as the Earth was about to go through various catastrophes the aliens had seen coming.

> The woman's parents were told, before she was born, that she was going to be an emissary

This reminded me of the UK case of Cynthia Appleton (see **FT191:32-38**). She too discovered her 'destiny' as a kind of ambassador for the aliens when living in Birmingham in her late 20s: a tall, blond 'alien' had appeared in her room in a similar flash of light. The alien showed her technology not then possible on Earth (this was 1957), such as a three-dimensional image giving clues to a cure for cancer by using 'vibrating atoms'. As an ordinary housewife she had no desire to be an alien go-between, but things got much worse when she was told that she was now pregnant with a child that while fathered by her husband was partly alien. She was given the birth date, sex and weight at birth to prove the aliens were truthful. A doctor who had taken up Cynthia's case had all this on record, and later shared it with me. The child was a boy and was born within days of the date given by the aliens, as well as only ounces out from the predicted weight.

The story had an odd mix of provable truth yet very unlikely reality. That Cynthia believed what she was told seems clear; that she really did carry a hybrid baby, very much less so. However, as far as I could check, the events occurred as described. Only the interpretation of what happened was in dispute.

Possibly the weirdest of all the 'Star Children' I met was 29-year-old Jayne. She was from a Manchester council estate, worked as a nurse in a clinic for often terminally ill patients and was a talented artist, as her paintings showed.

This was one of the first times I noticed how in contact cases visual creativity was often a feature of the witness, though how or why that might be a factor is another question. Is it as simple as being unusually imaginative in moulding an internal narrative around the kernel of a real event that others might describe in more mundane terms? Or is it some kind of selection mechanism for the event?

Jayne was amiable and artistic, and I could see she was special; she wrote poetry and her art often had a floating, dreamy feel to it and was very colourful. She told me about her out-of-body experiences and lucid dreams that seemed so real they were hard to differentiate from reality. Creativity was a part of who she was, whether awake and not.

I knew immediately her creativity was a factor in what she felt was happening and that psychologists would suspect a fantasy-prone personality. But was a very vivid imagination all that was going on here? For me, the idea of reality being personalised is an option. Perhaps what most folk see does truly differ from what highly creative individuals see – reality might be in the eye of the beholder more than we appreciate.

However, on a winter's night in 1986, when I had gone to visit her, something else happened. Jayne went to bed early, as she was working a shift first thing the next day, but her body clock was stopping her from sleeping and that seems to have triggered a kind of waking dream state. Then there was a thump, as she had experienced before when an out-of-body trip occurred. Only this time she was not in her body but in an alien desert realm. She was looking out from a ridge, and could feel hot sand touching her feet. It was entirely real, as if she had been teleported there in a moment. She described it as like being taken out into the desert by her parents and left there, alone and miles from anywhere; as if she were a stranger from elsewhere put into a hostile environment by others.

She was a 'star child', I was coming to realise, one of a small group of people who seemed to think they might actually be one.

She watched as a ball of light, one of many, flew down from the sky and 'entered' her abdomen, creating a soothing, comforting sensation. Then Jayne sat up in her bed feeling the cold Manchester air. She looked at me and Roy, my fellow investigator, asking, "Was I once an alien?" as if thinking this for the first time.

From that day on, I did not dismiss the idea of 'Star Children' quite so easily. Indeed, I started to see this was a real sub-phenomenon of a bigger mystery.

FOLKLORE RISING

Artist **BEN EDGE** has travelled the length and breadth of Britain recording the weird and wonderful folk customs alive in communities all over the country, using his experiences and photographs as inspiration for a series of colourful and atmospheric paintings. In this extract from his new book, *Folklore Rising: An Artist's Journey Through the British Ritual Year*, he finds himself in Devon to witness one of the county's stranger traditions, and he speaks to FT about the redemptive potential of folklore in modern life.

Turning the Devil's Stone, Shebbear, Devon, 5 November

I'd arranged to meet the vicar at the Devil's Stone itself, and wandered over the wet grass to where the huge rock squatted beneath an ancient oak on the village green. Nearby, a tall figure was hovering, wrapped up in a scarf, gloves and coat: the vicar, a softly spoken man named Martin Warren who had kindly offered to speak to me about the origins of the strange tradition. He shared the story he had been told on becoming the vicar of Shebbear over 20 years ago.

"We don't do bonfires here, Guy Fawkes and all the rest of it," he explained. "Instead, we turn the Stone on the fifth of November. The bell-ringers of St Michael's ring the bells beforehand to scare off the Devil. Then they come out and turn the Stone with crowbars." He pointed at the ground and continued, "You can see the dent from where it was last year. The story's based on the Book of Revelation, which describes a war in Heaven between St Michael and the Devil. The legend is that when the Devil was ejected from Heaven, a stone was hurled after him, trapping him here."

I then asked the vicar about the Stone itself. "The Stone is a glacial erratic," he told me. "It doesn't belong here and presumably arrived during the Ice Age. So the story's an attempt to explain why it's here." There is so much creativity born out of "not knowing" in folklore; whether it's local folk tales, costumes or, in my case, artworks, it's a never-ending goldmine of inspiration.

I've heard stories of churches being built on the sites of standing stones, but the Reverend Martin wasn't convinced that was the case in this instance. Instead, he explained, most of the churches dedicated to St Michael were built on hilltops, which connect them with the idea of heavenly battles. Then he led me into the church and showed me an old grave decorated with a skull that had greenery growing out of its eye sockets, which he agreed was a type of Green Man. He added, "The fact that there's all the foliage coming out of it speaks of fertility. So it's going right back into pre-Christian times, but was adopted as a scene of God's life of creation." He also showed me a beautifully preserved Norman doorway, carved with stylised animal heads "to scare away evil spirits", and explained that a church would have stood on the site all the way back to the Saxon era; that the Devil's Stone was probably connected to the collection of taxes in the Shebbear Hundred, where it would have been a central point. As I looked around, he apologised and said he had to head off to prepare the speech he would be giving later.

"I WANDERED BACK OUT TO FIND THAT A GAZEBO HAD BEEN RAISED OUTSIDE THE DEVIL'S STONE INN"

I wandered back out to find that a gazebo had been raised outside the Devil's Stone Inn, where preparations were in full swing. A big crowd was expected and when I popped into the pub, a local who'd made himself comfortable at the bar explained, "We got new owners: the past ones fell out of love with both the pub and the tradition, but this lot have fully embraced it; they got it right – there'll be a hog roast later too." Then he added, "Be careful in here. It's haunted you know. I've seen things myself: there's a bit by the bar where you can feel the temperature drop, it gets so cold. This is actually one of the most haunted pubs in the country."

PHOTOGRAPH AND PAINTING BY BEN EDGE

SHEBBEAR

He was surprised I'd travelled down from London. "You come all this way to see a stone flipped!" he laughed with a gappy grin. "You know it takes a year for the Devil to burrow down and escape, so they have to flip it to keep him trapped down there? Well, that's the story anyway."

My kind and helpful hosts in the village had mentioned me to a local historian, Ron Ackland, who said he was happy to talk to me, so after leaving the pub I crossed the square to his house, where he welcomed me in. He already had a selection of photos laid out on the table and explained proudly, "I did it for 20 years and my dad did it for 40." He added, "All my family were bell-ringers and the bell-ringers do it."

When I asked him how long the tradition went back, he broke into laughter and said, "No one knows why we do it", before becoming serious again and saying, "They call it the Devil's Stone now, but before the war it was just known as Shebbear Stone. It's been going on forever. During the war, they missed a turning and things in the war were going bad, so some of the boys went out and flipped it one night, and the war changed. There was another time when a rat ran out from under the stone when they were turning it, and people thought that was the Devil himself." When I asked him where he thought the Stone came from, he said, "I always like to think it's a meteorite; it's a bit of this, it's a bit of that. It's not like slate or granite, it's just an amalgamation of all sorts of things."

As we were talking, there was the most stunning sunset, the sky glowing like fire, with soft, purple clouds drifting across the horizon as the Sun slowly sank into the Torridge Valley. When he saw me out, Ron, now aged 88, said he'd be watching from indoors. There was a buzz now around the pub, a bar had been set up in the gazebo and the hog roast van had arrived; queues were forming for food and drink, so I decided to wait inside for the turning to begin.

BEN EDGE

It soon fell dark and the scary-looking Devil on the pub sign was illuminated spookily by lights. Children were playing wildly around the Stone itself, leaping over each other and getting rougher in their play. The fact that no parents intervened suggested this always happened, almost as if it too was part of the tradition. A woman with dark-red hair and a fleece zipped right up to her chin told me in a rich Devonshire accent, "I've been witnessing this since I was three years old, and I'm now nearly 51." When I asked her about the children, she explained, "When we were younger, if you were jumping over the Stone and if you caught your hand or your foot, it was always told that the Devil had caught your leg." Suddenly, the bells started pealing and the children's excitement grew. She continued, "You could guarantee you'd always end up with a cut on your hand or something wherever you landed, and that's surprising as it's grass."

ABOVE AND LEFT: The tradition of turning the Devil's Stone photographed in 1946 and today.

The ringing of the bells ebbed away into the night air. As the bell-ringers who were to flip the stone appeared alongside the vicar, the children parted ways and everyone took their position under the street lights that lit up the ground where the Stone lay. In a loud voice, the vicar declared, "So we come afresh this year to turn the Stone once more, to declare the Devil does not have the last word, to stand upon the rock, upon the stone of faith." Then he called upon Shebbear's bell-ringers to begin their task and the chant rose, "Turn the stone, turn the stone, turn the stone..."

As the seven bell-ringers pushed their crowbars beneath the rock, and started to jack it into an upright position, I could imagine them alone, no crowds, just like that time during the war – a group of superstitious people flipping a stone in the black of night. I could visualise a cloud opening, St Michael ejecting the Devil from Heaven – and the Devil falling underneath a large stone; perhaps he's accidentally crossed paths with a passing meteorite. He passes distant stars, galaxies and planets, before hitting the ground and disappearing beneath the black earth. My composition was forming it in my mind's eye: the Devil just breaking through the surface as the Stone reaches its most vertical point; a boy shouts, "Hurry up" – just before it falls, crushing the Devil back down beneath the earth. The crowd cheered, the tradition upheld. Everyone disappeared back into the Devil's Stone Inn, as local bands played and the drink flowed freely.

ON THE RITUAL TRAIL

***BEN EDGE** talks to FT about his journey around Britain and how folklore changed his life*

What started you on your quest to document and make artworks recording Britain's folkloric traditions and seasonal customs?

Leading up to the project, I was going through a transitional period in my life and suffering from depression. After losing my job as a labourer on New Year's Day – the last of a long string of jobs in which I felt stuck – I had a moment of clarity and decided that things couldn't get any worse and it was time to go for it; that it was down to me to take back control of my life, and despite not knowing how the hell I was going to do it, I made the decision that I would make a living as an artist from here on out, no matter what. During this period, I had recently read Peter Ackroyd's biography of London and began taking long walks through the city, learning about its past and its folklore, and visiting sites that I had read about. This led me, inevitably, to the Tower of London, where I had decided to approach the Ravenmaster at the Tower to paint his portrait. I hadn't realised that it was the day of the Spring Equinox. [For more on the Tower's Ravenmasters, see **FT206:30-36** and **FT382:6-7**] I came out the underground station at 12 noon, and serendipitously stumbled upon the London Druid Order performing their Spring Equinox annual ritual.

Witnessing this seems to have been an epiphany. In what ways did it impact your life and your art?

Yes, it was definitely an epiphany, as the whole direction of my life changed from that moment. That was nearly a decade ago, and ever since I have been obsessively researching, painting and documenting British folklore. This obviously changed the subject matter of my art; I'd always been interested in folklore, and sometimes my work was inspired by it, but the world of seasonal customs was a totally new one to me. The fact that I could actually get out there and visit these contemporary ritual practices, talk to the people, witness it with my own eyes, re-engage with the wheel of the year was a huge psychological shift. It gave me the feeling that we are part of something larger than ourselves as human beings, and that the shackles of my urbanised existence had been removed.

How did you feel arriving in small, often rural communities with a camera? Were people welcoming, or did you feel uncomfortable as an outsider?

BEN EDGE

Well, it's been a mixed bag, especially at the beginning. When I was first on the ritual trail, there weren't many people like me who were going to these things, so it was mostly just me and the communities that were keeping these traditions alive. There was an element of suspicion from some people – What's he doing here? What does he want? Having said that, for the most part people have been incredibly welcoming. Even those who were suspicious at first – after seeing me there all day from beginning to end, drinking and joining in the festivities, rather than just taking pictures – well, you soon become acquainted and I've made great friends and met some incredible people along the way. People also then start going out of their way to help you, by introducing you to people at the heart of the traditions. It's a real privilege to see these tight-knit communities brought together by the creativity and joy of their own regional cultures and traditions.

Some of the customs and celebrations you have painted have a slightly dark or surreal feel to them. Were there any 'Wicker Man' moments on your journey?

I think that because *The Wicker Man* is such a great and haunting film, it etches itself into your mind for life; so when you first start visiting seasonal customs, you almost arrive with an expectation of them being like that – which can make you feel a little bit anxious, especially when you first see the costumes and feel the energy of communities that you are clearly not part of. You can feel like an outsider, and that can be slightly unnerving – but thankfully I have never been sacrificed! Joking aside, though, the feeling of nature worship, whether intentional or not on the part of the participants, does give it that *Wicker Man* edge visually; and that was probably one of the reasons, at the start, that I was inspired to paint these things. Over time, though, that becomes less and less important, because you soon realise you are witnessing living traditions that very much belong to the here and now.

How do the rituals and traditions of folklore fit into contemporary Britain? What do they have to say to us in the 21st century?

I think one of the main reasons that folk customs endure is that they are a celebration of the collective identity of a community, and as we move forward and away from our imperialistic past and the notion of a one-size-fits-all national identity, the idea of regional cultures that manifest both our shared humanity and history and our individual creativity, is much more in tune with the nature and diversity of contemporary Britain. I also think that they are a much needed antidote to the monoculture of capitalism and fundamentally help keep the world an interesting place. They really are a celebration of being alive and remind us that we are part of nature – which is as important as ever in the face of environmental threats and climate change.

ABOVE: *The Devil's Den*, oil on canvas, 2021.

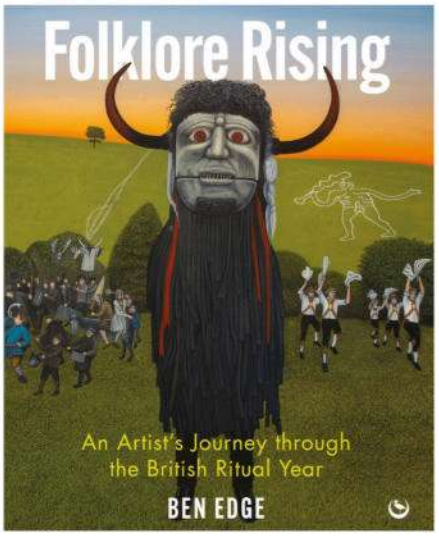
What do you see as the relationship between folkloric customs and fine art? Do they share anything?

I'm constantly inspired by the folk art created by people within the communities that I visit. These are people who wouldn't consider themselves to be artists, and yet so much love and attention to detail goes into the costumes, masks and ritual objects… there is so much charm and authenticity to it all, which highlights to me that the creative impulse is strong within us all and that we are all artists to some degree. With that in mind, you ask yourself whether fine art and folk art are so different. Perhaps it was out of our need for ritual, and understanding ourselves within the cosmos, that the creative impulse was born.

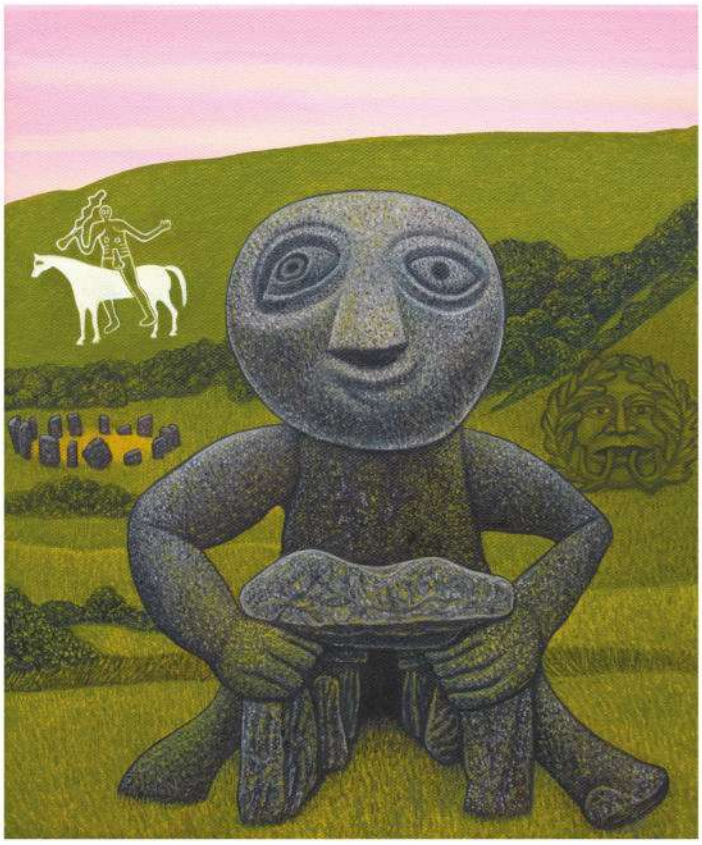
After witnessing so many weird and wonderful customs around the British Isles do you have any particular favourites or stand-out,transformative memories of your journey?

There are so many… Obviously, the Druids on Tower Hill was what started the whole thing for me. After visiting Stonehenge for the Summer Solstice, I decided the next day to pop in to see the stones on my way back to London; and as I stepped out of the bus from the visitor centre, to my amazement there was the London Druid Order preparing to perform their own private ceremony. It had happened again: I had serendipitously found myself in the right place at the right time. It felt as if I was being sent signs from the great unknown, telling me that I was on the correct path...

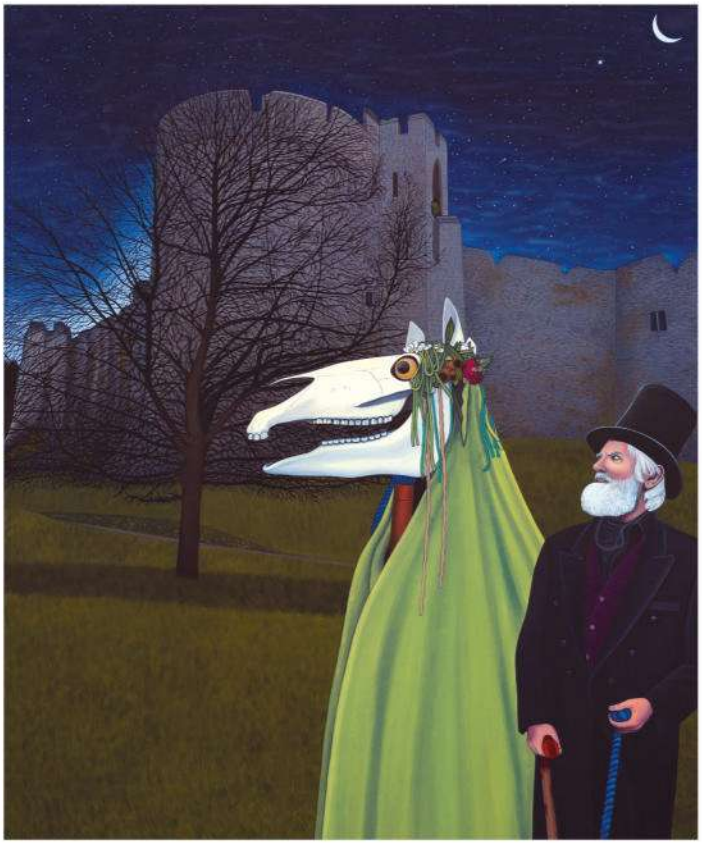
BEN EDGE is an artist, musician, filmmaker and author. In 2021, his 'Ritual Britain' Exhibition at the Crypt gallery of St Pancras New Church attracted over 10,000 visitors. Ben has also created artwork and art directed music videos for musical acts such as Fat White Family and Raf Rundell and released his own debut solo album titled *New Tradition*, now available on vinyl on Glass Modern Records.



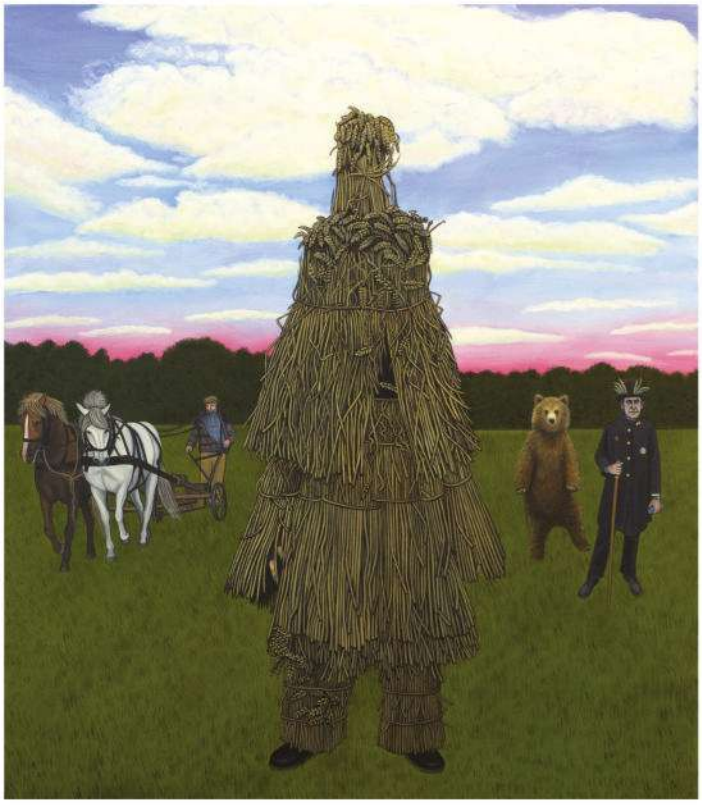
Folklore Rising: An Artist's Journey Through the Ritual Year
by Ben Edge is published on 8 October by Watkins, £25.00.
www.watkinspublishing.com



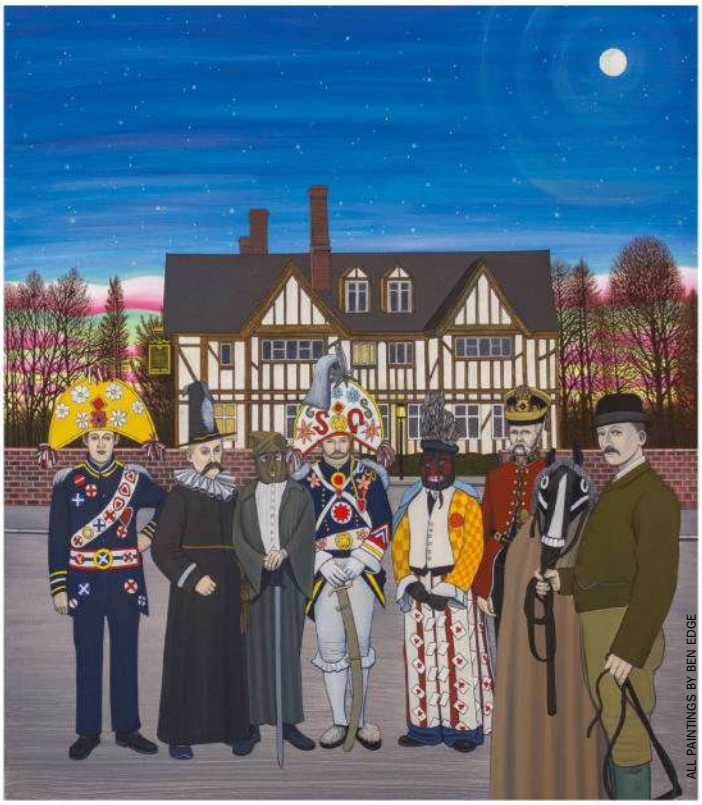
Earth Mother, oil on canvas, 2024.



The Mari Lwyd, oil on canvas, 2019.



The Straw Bear, oil on canvas, 2019.



ALL PAINTINGS BY BEN EDGE

The Mummer's Play, oil on canvas, 2021.

A FEAST OF FOLKLORE

In an extract from his new book about British food folklore, **BEN GAZUR** examines the weirdest culinary traditions, rituals, and tales cooked up across the centuries.

The other day I spilled some salt while cooking. Almost unconsciously I took a pinch and threw it over my left shoulder. Doubtless many of us would have done the same and not given it too much thought. Folklore can have a power that is hard to understand until we examine it.

Where did the idea that spilled salt should be thrown over the shoulder come from? It was pondering questions like this that led to me writing this book. It turns out that there is not a singular answer. Some point to salt being given to visitors as a symbol of the host/guest relationship that was formed by dining together; to spill it was a sign that trouble would come between the two and so a little was sacrificed to ward off this ill omen.

Others suggest that spilling salt offered hospitality to evil spirits or even the Devil himself. Since evil always approached from the left, or *sinister*, side then tossing salt over the left shoulder was a means of driving these spirits away.

Explanations like this are often given but are seldom satisfactory. Such is the way with folklore. Written sources are often hideously late and we cannot interrogate the originators of these beliefs, but food folklore is often our best glimpse into the lives of our ancestors. All we can do is search out the food folklore which was recorded and use it to reconstruct the mental worlds of people who have otherwise left very little mark on the pages of history.

Here is a tasting menu of some of the stranger edible aspects of British folklore.

KNOWING YOUR ONIONS

Vegetables were the food of the masses for centuries and so it is unsurprising that popular lore attached to them. When all you have in your cupboard is an onion, then it is to onions that you turn in times of need.

One of the most persistent powers attributed to onions is that they act as magnets for bacteria and viruses. By hanging an onion in the home, you ensured all the infectious bugs from the outside world would be sucked up and thus prevent the family falling ill. One family from Orkney would keep an onion cut in half in the pantry and the children were given strict instructions never to touch it – it had all the germs in the house in it. It may be that this stems from the miasma theory of infection, with the pungent aroma of onions driving out the sickening stenches that were thought to cause illness.

When smallpox struck Sheffield in 1927 many houses hung an onion in hopes of stopping it from infecting the home. In other places, the onion was hung in the house to give a warning of illness. When an infectious person entered the home, the onion would turn black from absorbing their illness.

The *Daily Chronicle* reported the health-preserving properties of onions as a fact in 1915.

'The virtues of the onion were never more plainly demonstrated than during the great cholera epidemic in London in 1849. Saffron Hill was practically free of it, although the surrounding neighbourhood suffered severely. The Board of Health investigated, and discovered that it was due to the fact that all the cholera-proof houses were occupied by the Italian organ-grinders who consumed huge quantities of onions, which were hanging in strings from the ceilings of their rooms. When this was made known Londoners just reeked of onions! In many rural districts this superstition is still scrupulously observed. The onions are left blackened in appearance when they are considered to have become impregnated with

FOLKLORE IS OFTEN OUR BEST GLIMPSE INTO THE LIVES OF OUR ANCESTORS

BELOW: The philosopher Pythagoras is said to have died after refusing to flee assassins through a bean field as he considered beans to have souls. **FACING PAGE:** Flitch bearers carry the flitch during the Dunmow Flitch trials in Great Dunmow, Essex, a tradition that goes back to the early 12th century

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

WELLCOME COLLECTION

ABOVE: An 18th century engraving showing the procession of the Dunmow Flitch. **BELOW:** A wall painting in the church of Ösmo, Sweden, shows a milk-stealing hare regurgitating milk for its witch master. Several Swedish churches have images of a *Mjölkhare*, or milk-hare, in the act of either stealing milk or vomiting it up.

the impurities of the air, and are then either consigned to the dustbin or burnt, and fresh bunches substituted.'

Vegetable folklore in Britain could be found to suit all moments in life, even from before the moment of conception onwards. It was said that beans, particularly the smell of bean plants blooming, caused lust. One person in Oxfordshire commented, "There ent no lustier scent than a beanfield in bloom." In Suffolk, when the beans were flowering it was said "It wouldn't be long before the missus was calving." The 17th century herbalist Nicholas Culpeper agreed with this as he assigned beans to the influence of Venus. French beans were said to 'engender sperm'; but then they are French. A key part in conceiving a child was nutting – when young people would venture into the countryside to gather nuts. One curious saying collected in Oxford has it that "a good nut year is a good baby year".

MEATY MAGIC

The language of meat in English is fascinating and reveals class structures going back nearly 1,000 years. When we sit down for a meal we do not eat cow, we eat beef. Nor do we feast on pig, we have some pork. Many meats have not shared their names with the animals they come from since the Norman Conquest of 1066. The elite classes that came to England spoke French while most of the population continued to speak forms of Old English. Most of the upper classes would only see farm animals when they were served up

cooked at their dining table. A sheep was a *mouton* to them, so we eat mutton today. The poorer people who actually raised the animals continued to call them *sceap* and so we still see sheep grazing in fields today. Similar verbal repercussions can be seen in the French *porc* and *boeuf* that grace our plates today.

The relative absence of beef from the common person's table has made it somewhat scarce in folk rituals and charms. In Cornwall, one folklorist did discover an old woman who kept an infallible amulet for good luck in her pocket at all times – the dried tip of an ox's tongue. It was also said that when tongue was served, the tip should be sliced off and kept in a purse. This ensured that whoever had the tongue would never lack for money.

The Dunmow Flitch is a side of bacon that is awarded to any couple who can truthfully claim that they have been married for at least a year and a day without ever once regretting their marriage – so long as they pass the Flitch Trials.

The Flitch Trial involves the swearing of an oath and production of witnesses that can confirm a couple's matrimonial harmony. A popular, though probably mythical, account of the origins of this tradition dates it to the 12th century in the village of Little Dunmow in Essex. Reginald Fitzwalter and his lady wife disguised themselves as poor folk and visited the prior of the local abbey. There they declared they had been married for a year and a day and sought the prior's blessing on their union. As well as holy words the prior gave them a side of bacon. Fitzwalter then revealed his true identity and bestowed lands on the abbey on the condition that the profits were used to distribute bacon to those who could make a similar claim about their marriage.

The Dunmow Flitch became a byword for a happy union. Chaucer's 14th-century Wife of Bath, herself a survivor of unhappy marriages, referred to it in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The bacon was nat fet for hem, I trowe,
That som men han in Essex at Dunmowe.

The earliest officially recognised winner

of the flitch is one Richard Wright of Norwich in 1445. Oddly, his wife, who was also integral to his bringing home the bacon, is not mentioned.

There have been accusations that some awards of bacon were not entirely fair. It was reported in the early 19th century that one couple who had successfully claimed the prize had certain natural (if unfortunate) advantages in their marriage: the husband was deaf and the wife blind.

MILK THIEVES

Thanks to the belief that hares were witches in disguise, to see one in a field of cows was a terrible thing; it was thought they stole the milk. One enterprising Yorkshire witch was said to take the form of a cute hedgehog while out milking her neighbour's cows.

Witches could harm a dairy in other ways. In a witch trial case from Guernsey in 1581 the accused witches, Katherine Eustace and her daughter, were said to have put a curse on a cow. Their accuser, Collas Cousin, is said to have turned away the pair when they came begging for milk. Later, Cousin's cow began to produce blood instead of milk.

Cow's milk was not the only kind that witches hungered after. Witch's milk was the term for the fluid that comes from some babies' nipples. This neonatal galactorrhea can be caused by the influence of the mother's hormones on the developing infant, but was in the past thought to be sought by witches as food for their familiar spirits.

There is an interesting piece of theology behind why the Devil and his servants would have to steal milk. Christianity taught that the power of generating new materials or creation belonged to God alone. The Devil could corrupt or take, but he could not make something from nothing. If he wanted to reward his followers he had to steal something that already existed.

Witches and the Devil were not the only milk thieves out there. Cats may proverbially love to get the cream, but they really shouldn't: many cats lack the enzyme lactase that breaks down the sugars in milk. In Scotland the fondness of cats for dairy products was so entrenched that a rather drastic remedy was created.

In the 19th century, cats could be seen with their left ear missing, cut off to discourage them from stealing milk and cream. This practice springs from the legend of a man who had been left in charge of the home while his wife was at confession. Spotting the family cat filching milk, he sprang on it and hurled it through a window which shattered and sliced off the cat's left ear. The man greeted his returning wife by brandishing the ear aloft as a sign of his successful guarding of the dairy. Apparently the cat never stole milk again and would even refuse it if offered.

LEFT: Witch cakes like this one were hung in homes as apotropaic objects to ward off evil.

BEN GAZUR

If you don't want your cat to leave your house, though, it was said that you should butter the pads of its feet. This might actually work if your cat then has to spend a long time cleaning its paws.

(DON'T) LET THEM EAT CAKE

If you want to catch a witch, a cake can be vital tool. In Lincolnshire it was said that to make a witch appear a cake stuck full of pins should be burned on a griddle or pan over a fire. Quite what you should do with the witch once they arrive is not recorded.

If you want to make an effective witch cake, you may have to get creative with your ingredients. In the *Caledonian Mercury* of 1778 one writer records, "As to the burning of cakes, made of the suspected person's water [urine], I really do not put much faith in this, though Mr Forbes thinks it an infallible method of discovery." Such toilet cakes were baked in Salem before the infamous witch trials.

Thankfully not all witch cakes required trips to the toilet. As late as 1913 the *Liverpool Echo* reported that "Round about Flamborough Head 'witch cakes' are to be met with in almost every cottage. These are circular-shaped, with a hole in the middle, and with spikes projecting on all sides. If you hang one up in your cottage and once a year burn it and put another in its place you will have good luck, we are told."

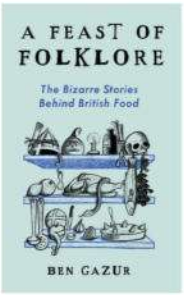
Of all the food folklore traditions in England perhaps the one I most wish to see involves a cake and a bull, as all good things do. Herefordshire farmers would prepare a dense plum cake with a hole in the middle. This cake was then placed over a horn of the largest bull on the farm. According to accounts the animal was then prodded and 'tickled' to make him buck his head so that the cake was tossed from his horn. It was said that a bucket of cider sloshed into the bull's face might make him more active in throwing. How the cake was thrown was important: if the cake flew forwards, the harvest would be bountiful; but if it fell backwards a meagre crop was predicted.

THREE CHEERS FOR FOLKLORE

The ubiquity of drinking alcohol, and the merriment of being always slightly drunk, must have had an influence on history. William Pitt the Younger was prime minister at a crucial period during the Regency crisis sparked by George III's mental instability and the Napoleonic Wars. Yet he was also known as a 'three bottle man' because of the quantity of port he drank every day.

Curing a loved one of alcoholism might make the difference between a violent, poverty-stricken life and one of relative happiness, so people turned to some unusual folklore remedies. Wives were advised to put a live eel (presumably a small one) into their husband's drink to stop them becoming drunkards. John Swan in his *Speculum Mundi*, published in 1635, states that "the eggs of an owle, broken and put into the cup of a drunkard, will so work with him that he will suddenly loathe his good liquor, and be displeased with drinking."

If that fails, you can always use the method devised to prevent someone getting drunk in the first place. If you roast the lungs of a hog and eat them, and nothing else throughout the day, then no matter how much you imbibe it will be impossible to get drunk. Or at least that is what was said. It may be that after feasting on hog's offal you don't feel like drinking much. According to Welsh belief you could mitigate the rest of the year's drinking by going without on Good Friday.



Adapted and excerpted from *A Feast of Folklore: The Bizarre Stories Behind British Food* by Ben Gazur, published by Unbound (hardback, £20, ebook, £10).
All rights reserved.

BEN GAZUR is the author of *History's Strangest Deaths* and *A Short History of the World in 50 Failures*. He likes to bake cakes (without urine in them).

HARE TODAY

ANDREW MICHAEL HURLEY's 2019 novel *Starve Acre* was widely acclaimed for using elements of Folk Horror to explore the trauma of grief, and a new film adaptation – directed by DANIEL KOKOTAJLO – has lost none of the book's potency. **BOB FISCHER** meets both men to discuss hares, witchcraft and the abiding influence of Nigel Kneale...

I'm fascinated by the folklore of hares," says Andrew Michael Hurley. "There are lots of stories about witches transforming into hares to escape farmers – including one local to me. In a place called Woodplumpton, just outside Preston, there's a witch called Meg Shelton buried in unconsecrated ground beneath an enormous granite boulder. The story goes that, after she'd first been buried, she climbed out of the plot and was seen wandering around the village, so they buried again head down and put a huge rock on top of the grave.

"There are numerous stories about her destroying livestock and spoiling the milk, then escaping from the farmers by shapeshifting into a hare and darting off across the fields. So I think that story was probably in my mind when I was thinking of hares as folkloric figures. They're mysterious animals: big, muscular, sinewy, long-legged weird things that you don't see very often."

We're discussing *Starve Acre*. Andrew's acclaimed novel of that title was published in October 2019, and focuses on the all-consuming grief of Richard and Juliette, a young 1970s couple whose new life in Richard's remote Yorkshire childhood home is torn apart by the death of their five-year-old son, Ewan. Richard, an archæologist, becomes obsessed with the local legend of a hanging tree in the house's barren grounds, and also with the associated folklore of Jack Grey: a malevolent nature spirit made manifest in the twitching ears of a distinctly unearthly hare.

Further inspiration, explains Andrew, came from his chance discovery of the title itself.

"This is how exciting my research is!" he laughs. "I first saw the name Starve Acre in a book called *English Field Names*. I was leafing through and it kept recurring. There was a field in Yorkshire called Starve Acre, and others around the country, too. I began to wonder what had happened in those fields for them to acquire that name, and to think about some of the folklore that might be associated with them.

For some reason, nothing grew in those places. And that 'for some reason' really intrigued me, and that's where the story came from."

> RICHARD BECOMES OBSESSED WITH THE LOCAL LEGEND OF A HANGING TREE IN THE HOUSE'S GROUNDS

GRIEF, GUILT AND FEAR

The book has now been adapted for the big screen by director Daniel Kokotajlo, whose film does an evocative job of preserving the book's sense of windswept isolation and very rural weirdness. Both Andrew and Daniel join me in adjacent windows via the mystical powers of Zoom, and are clearly filled with admiration for each other's work.

"I read the book before it came out," says Daniel. "I got hold of a promo copy and I loved it, and we started talking about a film version very early on. I was struck by Andrew's approach to the mythic, symbolic elements in the story. It was also unashamedly an ode to old British storytelling – it reminded me of MR James and Robert Aickman, but with a focus on the emotions of the relationship between a grieving couple. It was exciting to me, a genuinely rare opportunity to make something strange and uncanny and unidentifiable.

"Grief is a subject I'm preoccupied with, and that's something I felt Andrew tackled in an interesting way. There's a thin line between hope and horror when it comes to grief. People can find comfort in spirituality and religion, and that can be a genuine source of relief, but it can also have a crazy effect on the psyche."

The turmoil in Richard and Juliette's

HAL SHINNIE

relationship reflects this conflict perfectly. While her husband throws himself obsessively into excavating Starve Acre itself, hoping to unearth the fabled hanging tree, Juliette deals with her grief by embracing the supernatural. And although Jack Grey is ostensibly a malevolent figure, she begins to find his presence worryingly comforting. Richard, however, is haunted by childhood memories of his own father conducting some particularly alarming research into the local folklore.

Did either Andrew or Daniel bring their own memories of childhood nightmares to the story, I wonder? Do they remember hares hopping into their bedrooms, or their own equivalent of Jack Grey poking his spindly talons around the corner of the wardrobe door?

"I had a very strict religious upbringing," says Daniel, whose 2018 debut feature *Apostasy* explores his childhood as a devout Jehovah's Witness. "So I didn't really have folkloric or Pagan ideas around in the house. I had a fear of the Devil and of demons messing with me, but that was always in a religious context. I was very scared of the Devil. So although I was always into horror films, every so often I would become plagued by guilt and would purge them all. I'd give them away to the other kids at school. It was a genuine fear; it would fade away then come back every couple of months.

"But Andrew… the word 'Jack' is a common name for these kinds of figures, isn't it? I recently read the novelisation of *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and there's a section in that where they talk about Jack being a very common name for the Green Man".

"Yeah, the Jack in the Green," replies Andrew. "I don't know if you remember the 1970s book *Masquerade*, by Kit Williams? The hare in *Masquerade* is called Jack as well, so that's probably where I got the name from. I just wanted it to sound authentic, although the actual entity in *Starve Acre* is pretty much my invention."

TURNPIKE / CREATIVE COMMONS

THE POWER OF PLACE

What is clear is that both men have used their Northern upbringing as a profound inspiration. Both were raised on the other side of the Pennines to *Starve Acre*'s Yorkshire setting, but the story is infused with the black melancholy of the moorland that sweeps across the north of England.

"All my novels start with the peculiarity of place," nods Andrew. "And there's a unique topography to the north of England: I can't think of another place in the country where the urban and the rural meet so abruptly. I'm thinking of Blackburn, Burnley, Accrington, looking towards Pendle… these communities butting up really close to the moors. That emptiness, that expanse of wilderness is *right there* on your doorstep.

"And there are so many stories. It feels like there's a lot of history layered into the soil. Not only about the Pendle witches, but the Devil as well. Lancashire was a hotbed of Catholicism, but also rampant Paganism and Satanism, and the clash of those things is really interesting."

"Landscape is important for me, too," says Daniel. "We shot in Nidderdale, not far from Harrogate. We found a house on a slope that had an eeriness about it – you couldn't see the horizon, which I loved. Just a boggy slope of a field with nothing growing there. It felt just right."

The wintry feel is important too, I suggest. Some Folk Horror stories are steeped in the hallucinogenic strangeness of a baking hot midsummer, but *Starve Acre*'s nightmares are firmly rooted in the unrelenting mud, fog and snow of a particularly filthy moorland winter.

"It's about the transition out of that," nods Andrew. "The story begins in winter, and it's a winter that seemingly doesn't want to end. But eventually it does, and I was really interested in what that transition to spring might offer to the characters in

CHRIS HARRIS ©HOUSE STARVE ACRE LTD

TOP: Writer Andrew Michael Hurley on the moors. **CENTRE:** Woodplumpton, Lancashire, where accused witch Meg Shelton is buried under an enormous boulder in St Anne's churchyard. **ABOVE:** The folklore of hanging trees and nature spirits in *Starve Acre*.

CHRIS HARRIS ©HOUSE STARVE ACRE LTD

ABOVE: Matt Smith as the grieving and obsessed archæologist Richard in *Starve Acre*. **BELOW:** Director Daniel Kokotajlo and the film's cast on location in Yorkshire.

terms of their grief. A sense of hope, perhaps? But I was also interested in the actual process of things, and in the novel one of the things I tried to do was reverse that natural process quite a lot. So things go backwards that should go forwards! The unnaturalness of the landscape somehow mirrors the unnaturalness of Ewan's untimely death. No child should die at five years old, and that seemed to reflect the weirdness of the place itself."

The real-life reversal of natural processes actually caused problems on the shoot, with filming frequently put at the mercy of some typically mercurial Yorkshire weather.

"We shot the film in late winter and early spring, with the hope of capturing the feel of winter at the beginning of the shoot," recalls Daniel. "But in the first week, we had a heatwave – it was 30 degrees, and we had to get snow machines! I was so embarrassed. Then, in the second week, we were shooting indoors with the house blacked out and someone in the crew said 'Look outside!' There was a snowstorm, so we ran out and re-shot two scenes in half an hour."

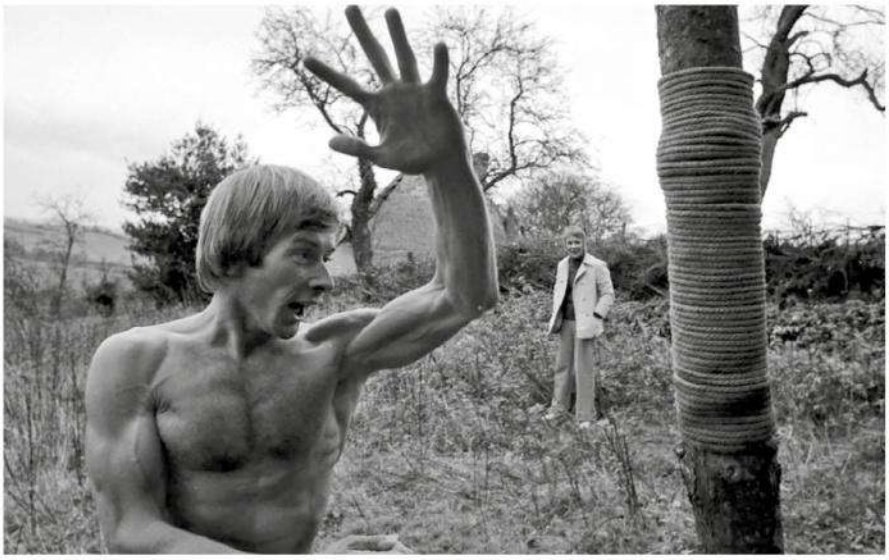
Daniel is quick to praise the contribution of his two lead actors, both of whom bring touching performances to the film – as well as some impeccable fantasy credentials. Playing Juliette is Morfydd Clark, fresh from her starring role as Galadriel in Amazon Prime's globe-straddling Tolkien adaptation, *The Rings of Power*. While Richard is played by the eleventh *Doctor Who* himself, Matt Smith.

"They were both super easy to work with and very creative," says Daniel. "They brought loads to it. I'd just seen Morfydd in [2019 horror film] *Saint Maud* before working on this and I was very excited to work with her. I'd heard she was into folklore and gothic material, and we spoke about the idea of trauma being passed down through myth. She got that straight away.

"And the same with Matt. He'd just come off shooting [HBO fantasy series] *House of the Dragon*, and he was keen to work on location. We spoke about the new wave of archæologists in the 1970s, all influenced by hippy culture and the social sciences. They had long hair and were getting their hands dirty! They weren't wearing dicky bows at universities, they were freer – which is what Matt brought to the film. Maybe originally Richard

> "THEY WEREN'T WEARING DICKIE BOWS AT UNIVERSITY, THEY WERE FREER"

CHRIS HARRIS ©HOUSE STARVE ACRE LTD



was a little stiffer, but Matt made him more authentic."

And on behalf of *Doctor Who* fans everywhere, I have to ask – there's a scene in the film where Richard lifts a small stone from the ground and identifies it as a "krynoid". Which, as old school *Who*-lovers will doubtless testify, was the name of the gigantic, killer alien plant in the 1976 Tom Baker story, *The Seeds of Doom*. Was this a deliberate nod to the trials of one of Matt's previous incarnations? Daniel is convulsed with laughter.

"That was an in-joke, yes! Just for you." And did Matt himself get the joke?

"He did eventually…"

LOST HORRORS

Although neither book nor film explicitly reference the time period in which they are set, both clearly belong to a decade that has become synonymous with a golden age of Folk Horror. Everyone smokes and drives rattly British cars, and the film is a sartorial riot of corduroy and turtle-necked jumpers. That 1970s setting, Andrew explains, derives from an unusual commission that inspired the earliest incarnation of the book. In early 2019, Liverpool-based publisher Dead Ink launched a range of vintage fiction purportedly acquired from the defunct "Eden Book Society". Among them was a somewhat bloodier version of *Starve Acre*, this time written – bafflingly – by a forgotten and long-deceased writer called Jonathan Buckley.

"The idea was that Dead Ink commissioned a number of writers to write 'lost' horror novellas that had supposedly been unearthed from the 1970s," smiles Andrew. "So it was good fun – I wrote it under that pseudonym, and I channelled all my love of gory Stephen King horror into it! The story was more or less the same, but it was maybe just a little more violent. And it was a fun exercise – I didn't have to be Andrew Michael Hurley, I could be someone else.

"Then my publisher at John Murray Press read the Dead Ink version and wanted to republish it as a more literary piece of fiction. So I got rid of the saws and the hammers!" Without giving too much away, however, there are scenes in the film that seem to derive from this earlier edition of the book, but that aren't present in the later version. Daniel is smiling knowingly.

"I love both versions of the book, so the film meshes them a bit," he explains. "I don't know if you noticed, Andrew – but I shot a scene where one character is going to read a book to Ewan. And he says 'I've got the latest Jonathan Buckley novel'. But it didn't work, so I had to cut it!"

The 1970s setting, both men agree, also ties the film æsthetically to the decade that produced *The Wicker Man*, *Robin Redbreast*, *Penda's Fen* and a legion of films and TV productions keen to explore the horrific implications of "what lies beneath".

"I'm a 1980s and '90s child, but the 1970s have always been nostalgic for me because I'm a massive fan of a lot of Seventies films," nods Daniel. "Those were the films I watched as a kid, so I was keen to recreate that feel for nostalgic value. But also, it's an interesting time in terms of male relationships. It comes across in the book a bit – the relationship between Richard and his dad, and the darker side of his dad, was something I was keen to explore in the film. Richard would have grown up in the 1950s, and his dad's beliefs and strictness would have had an effect on him. For me, that's the reason Richard comes back to this landscape – he wants to give his son the life he wished he'd had there. And that reflects a lot of father/son relationships around that time. They were difficult."

For Andrew, the 1970s setting lent the story some practical advantages, too. "I wanted to set it at a time when those two characters could plausibly be completely isolated," he explains. "If a weird hare turns up at your house now, there's prob-

TOP: Seventies Folk Horror in *Robin Redbreast*. **CENTRE:** And Seventies style in *Starve Acre*: Owen (Arthur Shaw), Richard (Matt Smith) and Juliette (Morfydd Clark). **ABOVE:** A scene from Nigel Kneale's 1975 *Against the Crowd* story *Murrain*, one of the inspirations for *Starve Acre*. **FACING PAGE:** Morfydd Clark as Juliette.

CHRIS HARRIS ©HOUSE STARVE ACRE LTD

ably a dedicated social media chatroom you can log onto! But Richard and Juliette have to deal with the intrusion of this strange creature into their house on their own."

When it comes to touchstones of 1970s Folk Horror, both Andrew and Daniel are in agreement. The TV play they both reference as a key inspiration for *Starve Acre* is *Murrain*, a 1975 drama written by Nigel Kneale for a long-forgotten ITV anthology series, *Against the Crowd* (for more on Kneale and *Murrain* see **FT218:28-29, 418:28-35, 437:42-49**). Here, a young vet arrives in an isolated rural community where a mysterious illness – the "murrain" of the title – has begun spreading from ailing livestock to local families. In an echo of the folk stories attached to Andrew's childhood nemesis Meg Shelton, irate farmers are accusing a reclusive elderly woman, Mrs Clemson, of using witchcraft to spread the disease.

"When Daniel and I spoke before the film got going, we talked about *Murrain*," says Andrew. "I've watched that so many times now and I find something new in it every single time. It's the ordinariness of it – it could be anywhere. But that ordinariness combines with the menace, and the staunch belief of these people that there's something supernatural in their midst. I love the way it plays with the clash between scientific progression and the apparent backwardness of magic. And the ending actually leaves you in doubt as to what's real and what isn't. It's just such a great example of that era of Folk Horror."

THE DARK SIDE

Accompanying the film's release in September is a month-long season of screenings at BFI Southbank in London, curated by Daniel himself. Cinema classics like *Don't Look Now* and *Eraserhead* rub shoulders with similarly eerie small-screen gems: *Robin Redbreast* and two instalments of the BBC's classic 1970s *A Ghost Story for Christmas* series. *Baby*, arguably the most disturbing episode of Nigel Kneale's 1976 series *Beasts* is in there too, and so – rather splendidly – is *Murrain*.

The modern surge of interest in all things Folk Horror is clearly showing no signs of abating. So why, I wonder as we reach the end of our conversation, have we become so fascinated by the darker side of the bucolic dream?

"It's something I've thought about quite a lot," admits Andrew. "I think it's possibly to do with climate change – there's a sense that we're losing landscapes and the folklore that goes with them. And maybe Folk Horror is a way of preserving those stories. There's something real and earthy and tangible about Folk Horror. Wherever it's set, they're real places. We live increasingly digital, filtered lives and I wonder whether the mud and the muck of Folk Horror offers a kind of authenticity – these places where stories are buried in the ground."

"The horror element is also about taking something that we crave and then abusing it in some way," adds Daniel. "We want to return to a nostalgic time or understand ourselves better by looking backwards, but there are superstitions and darkness there."

"That's one of the things that I really like about Folk Horror," continues Andrew.

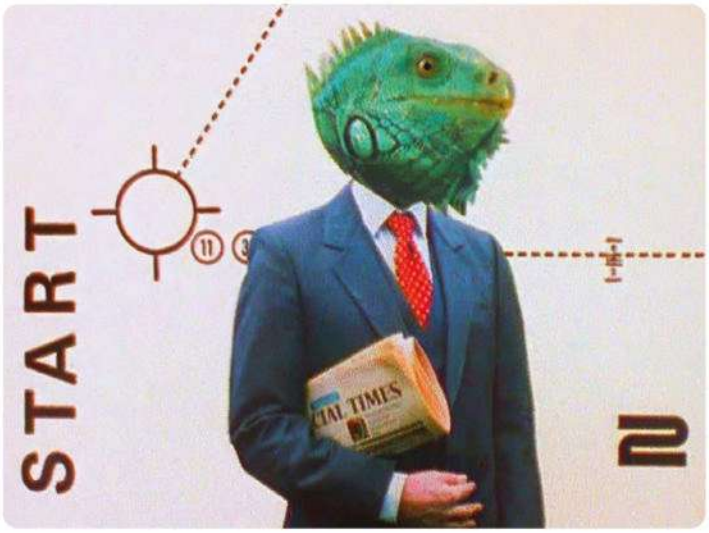
"It debunks that idea of England being a green and pleasant land and gets to what's underneath all that. There are so many parts of England where horrific things have happened. The sites of massacres and battles and hangings. You don't have to look that far back into the past to find them, really. "And I love the way that Folk Horror gets into that. It's alluring and seductive to imagine we can go back and live in small communities where everyone knew each other and power was localised. It's very romantic and idealised, but we can't go back to that – and when we do, we find a darkness. Something strange and mysterious."

Starve Acre **(reviewed p.61) is in cinemas from 6 Sept and on BFI Blu-ray and BFI Player from 21 Oct. *Roots, Rituals and Phantasmagoria*, a BFI Southbank season programmed by Daniel Kokotajlo, runs 2 Sept to 7 Oct. Andrew Michael Hurley's new novel, *Barrowbeck*, is published on 24 Oct by John Murray. With thanks to Andrew, David and Jill Reading at BFI.**

BOB FISCHER is FT's regular 'Haunted Generation' correspondent, morbidly fascinated by the stranger corners of late 20th century pop culture. You can find him scribbling at hauntedgeneration.co.uk or writing audio plays for mulgraveaudio.co.uk.

FORTEAN TV REVISITED

In 1997, Channel 4 viewers were treated to a television version of *Fortean Times* in which **REV LIONEL FANTHORPE** presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he wraps up the first series of *Fortean TV*...



LEFT: The sinister lizard-headed businessman from the show's titles: note the other *FT*.
BELOW: Our man Fanthorpe astride his trusty Harley Davidson.

Welcome back! Or if you missed last month, please sneak in quietly and don't disturb your fellow forteans. We are currently halfway through our watch party, reappraising the first classic series of *Fortean TV*. Despite the show covering some familiar ground – including subjects covered by Arthur C Clarke in his *Mysterious World* (**FT410:32-39, 411:42-47, 412:44-49**) and *Strange Powers* (**FT432:32-39, 433:42-49, 434:42-49**) series – we've been most impressed by the unusual approach of our host, the motorcycle mad Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe.

Unlike the presenter of many a po-faced paranormal programme, Fanthorpe never seeks to convince us of a particular explanation or to overexplain. If he has any Christian agenda, it is only to wonder – in the most inclusive sense – at the many mysteries of God's creation. The rich tapestry of life's weirdness is laid out before us as a work of art, and as inspiration for a little sing-along at the end of every episode.

So without further delay, let's see what the Reverend has up his leathery sleeves in the remaining episodes.

EPISODE SIX

Fanthorpe teleports across a scrapyard and emerges from inside a yellow wardrobe. "Is man an ape or an angel?" he asks us. "I suspect the answer lies somewhere in between." With this conundrum ringing in our ears he introduces the story of Oliver, a most unusual chimpanzee abducted from his African home in the late 1960s and exhibited in American sideshows as a 'baby Bigfoot'.

IF FANTHORPE HAS A CHRISTIAN AGENDA, IT IS ONLY TO WONDER AT THE MANY MYSTERIES OF GOD'S CREATION

The grainy archive footage demonstrates Oliver's striking appearance and remarkable human-like gait. Oliver disappeared from public view after being cruelly sold to a research laboratory, but thankfully he resurfaces later at an ape sanctuary in Texas. Staff describe his various quirks, including his unpleasant personal odour and his noted difficulties bonding with the other chimps.

For a man of the cloth the Reverend is perfectly quite open to evolution, casting just a little doubt over the quest for a 'missing link' that connects us to our ancestors. Too much has been discovered in the intervening years to summarise here, but the latest research suggests modern humans descend from *two* distinct 'stem' populations,[1] with the picture muddied further by interbreeding with close relatives such as the Neanderthals and Denisovans.[2]

There's an appearance by fresh-faced British zoologist Jonathan Downes – he'll be well known to regular readers as the founder of the Centre for Fortean Zoology.[3]

Here he lays out the five main options: is Oliver a secret CIA experiment in human/chimp crossbreeding? A semi-mythical African man-beast called the *agogwe*?[4] A cross between a chimpanzee and an *agogwe*? A chimp/pigmy chimp cross? Or a regular chimpanzee with abnormal chromosomes? (see **FT17:11, 20**)

Blood tests have since proven that Oliver was a relatively ordinary chimpanzee,[5] perhaps with some kind of injury that compelled him to walk upright, although he did reach the remarkable age of 55 before he died in 2012.[6] His legacy included a play park 'enrichment habitat' for the other chimps at the centre.

Next up, the tallest man in the world: 7ft 8in (2.34m) Pakistani bank clerk Mohammed Channa. Sadly Mr Channa died from kidney failure a little over a year after broadcast, at the age of 42.[7]

Then it's time for a viewer's letter. Following a chance meeting in Blackpool, Norman downs a few pints with his old childhood friend Jimmy Marriott. He later learns that Jimmy died in a car accident several hours *before* their session – and the landlord doesn't recall seeing anyone drinking with Norman…

Sticking with the morbid theme we learn that malaria kills two million Africans a year (it's now less than 600,000).[8] Dutch scientists find the chemicals from human feet that attract infected mosquitoes smell very similar to Limburger cheese. Little seems to have come of their high hopes for cheese-based malarial prophylaxis, and very similar research in America has recently been presented as a brand new discovery.[9]

To conclude, we visit Merran Fane and "Britain's only Faerie Shop" where visitors from all over the country share their first-hand experiences. The Cottingley fairies are dispensed with quickly, although researcher Joe Cooper still believes that little girls don't tell lies. You can read about the breakdown and failed marriage Joe suffered after he exposed the hoax in the *Wharfedale Observer*.[10]

Fairy fan and windswept harpist Maria Dunn spent six years trying to make contact with the little folk, and now she can summon the elves at whim. She wonders if she has merely unlocked some aspect of her imagination, but she does attribute strange runs of luck and coincidence to their magical help.

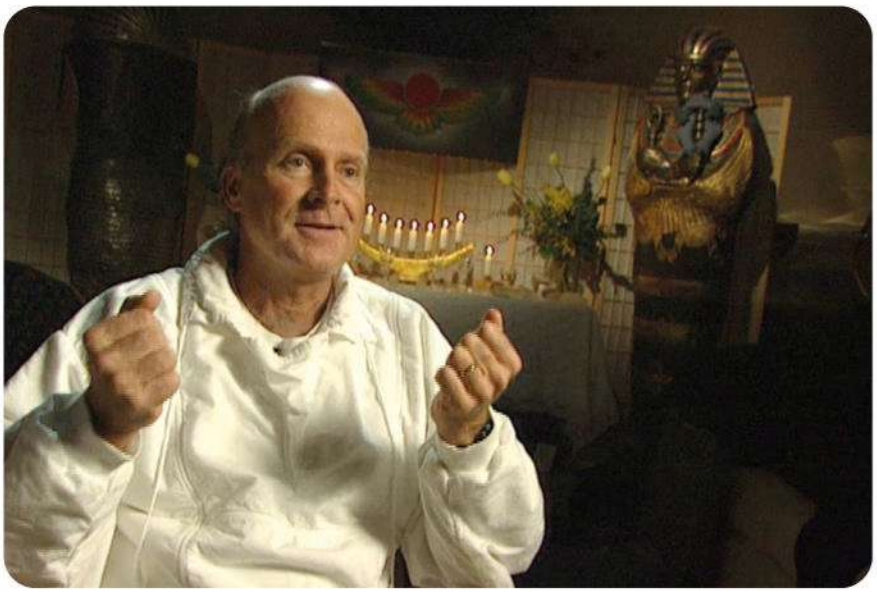
She conjures up a troupe, but they remain invisible to the cameras. "They don't understand what television is," she explains helpfully. We're played out with Fanthorpe's "Fairy Song" (to the tune of "When the Saints Go Marching in".)

EPISODE SEVEN

Buried up to his neck in the sand, Fanthorpe quotes Austrian soldier, philosopher and architect Ludwig Wittgenstein on the limits of human thought.

Then we travel to Salt Lake City, where members of the Summum sect are reviving

TOP: Oliver the… what exactly? demonstrates his startling human gait. **CENTRE:** Windswept harpist and fairy fancier Maria Dunn summons the little people through the power of music, although they remain invisible to the cameras. **ABOVE:** Reverend Fanthorpe and his friend Alf sing us out with "The Fairy Song".



TOP: Corky Ra, founder and director of the Summum religious sect. **CENTRE:** Summum's 40ft-tall replica pyramid-shaped temple in Salt Lake City. **ABOVE:** The two-headed cobra from Thailand that promised protection from evil spirits – unless it was actually a sign of the coming apocalypse.

CORKY RA DESCRIBES THE INTENSE VISION IN 1975 THAT LED TO HIS CONTACT WITH THE TELEPATHIC "SUMMA INDIVIDUALS"

the lost art of Egyptian mummification using high tech preservative fluids. Founder Corky Ra describes the intense vision in 1975 that led to his contact with the telepathic "Summa individuals," and we see the 40-foot (12m) pyramid he built as a place to practise their teachings.

The new mummification process is expensive, costing thousands of dollars for a small cat, or $32,000+ for a person (you can nearly double that in today's money). Clients cover the social spectrum from suspiciously well paid "warehouse cleaners" to doctors and lawyers. Despite 157 applicants, no human customers had been wrapped by the time of broadcast.

In fact, the first human to undergo the process was Corky himself, who died in January 2008. The Summum website now implies that mummification is reserved for the leaders and their pets. [11] This quirky sect crops up in a couple of interesting legal cases challenging the erection of Christian monuments in US public parks, and you can read about their constitutional battles in the *Salt Lake Tribune*. [12]

This week's letter finds Catherine Kimberly in a red British phone box covered in snails. Did they fall from the sky or, as Fort might suspect, teleport? We get a few sentences on stones with mystical powers, including the pre-Harry Potter Philosopher's Stone, the one that turns base metals into gold, all in the service of introducing entrepreneurial Austrian Robert Schindele and his 'Mineralien' or 'Superbiomin' rock powder.

It was another vision that first inspired Schindele to purchase some nondescript woodland in his home country. Building the access road disturbed dust from the volcanic rock on site and mysteriously rejuvenated the nearby trees that had been damaged by acid rain. A chemical analysis found the dust "unusually rich in essential minerals" and Schindele successfully treated his own gout, flatulence and inflamed tonsils, as well as his dandruff, with the powder. We hear his discovery went on to win international awards and garner an annual turnover of £10 million across 20 countries. Schindele himself receives "a thousand letters a day" from satisfied customers.

Fortean TV suggests it's all in the mind, but volcanic dust can act as a soil fertiliser and pH neutraliser (remember those acid damaged trees) [13] and it's conceivable

it could also act as an intestinal bulking agent and mineral supplement. If you are curious to learn more, or even to try some geophagy for yourself, it's still being mined and sold. [14]

We whizz through Indian snake charmers, a jewellery shop in Amsterdam guarded by a diamondback rattlesnake, and a two headed Siamese cobra in Thailand. Will it protect its finder from evil spirits or does it herald the apocalypse?

Next, Fanthorpe gives us a theatrical turn as St Columba warding off the Loch Ness Monster, [15] before accurately dismissing a half century of scientific searches as having had little success in locating the beast. Then we meet another figure familiar to longtime FT readers: "Modern day Merlin", stage magician, artist and pub raconteur the late Tony 'Doc' Shiels (obit, p.24), who recreates his 1976 summoning of the Cornish sea monster Morgawr with the help of a team of naked witches (his daughters).[16]

Shiels advocates the liberal use of alcohol to make oneself "vulnerable to bizarre occurrences". His photos of Morgawr and Nessie have been widely condemned as hoaxes, and *Scientific American* makes short work of them,[17] but to my eyes they look a lot like elephants swimming in shallow water, which would imply Shiels isn't strictly lying when he maintains "they are authentic photographs." And that's rather more fun, isn't it?

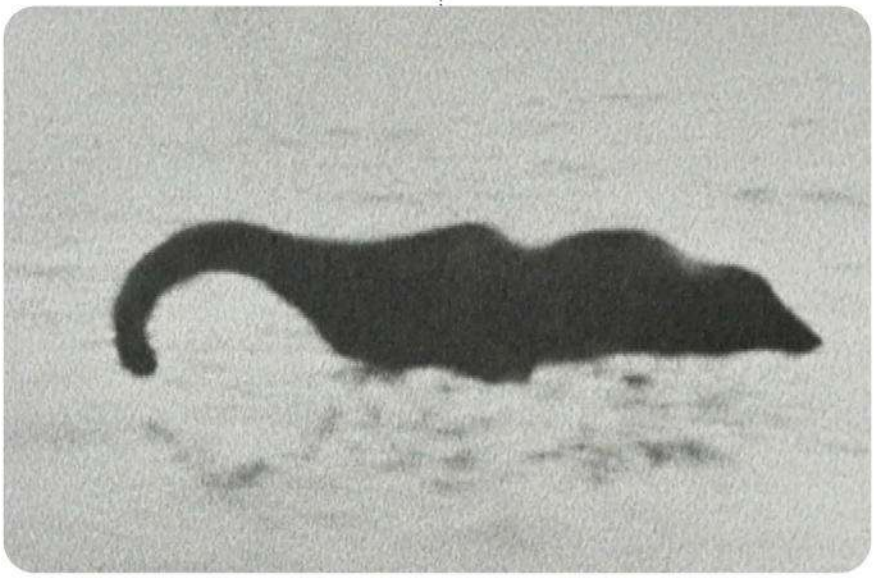
Over the credits we get the "The Mummy Song" (it's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic").

EPISODE EIGHT

With tongue firmly in cheek, the Anglican priest informs us that "communicating with higher entities" has become a multi-million dollar business. At least for some, such as Seattle medium JZ Knight, who since 1979 has been possessed by Ramtha, a 35,000-year-old warrior from Atlantis.[18] Ramtha teaches the usual humdrum New Age mix of reincarnation, meditation and tapping into "unused centres in the brain". We hear that JZ successfully copyrighted the spirit's name and sued another mystic for infringement. "I'm not a religious leader, I'm a business woman," she tells us brazenly, with her annual income reportedly exceeding $4 million.

Supported by various famous devotees, Ramtha is still going strong, with a packed programme of events well into 2024. However, before you rush to buy your tickets, you may wish to take a look at the accusations of channelled hate speech recorded by the Southern Poverty Law Centre. [19]

There now follows an extended section on unusual animals. In Mozambique, a starving Barbary lion is rescued from an abandoned circus; could the rare subspecies be revived through selective breeding? Belfast Zoo



TOP: One of Tony 'Doc' Shiels's photographs of Cornish sea monster Morgawr – or is it an elephant? **CENTRE:** Doc attempts to summon the monster with the help of his naked daughters. **ABOVE:** Seattle medium and hard-headed business woman JZ Knight is possessed by an Atlantean called Ramtha.

TOP: One of the 'diamond eye'cats getting hitched at a wedding ceremony in Thailand. **CENTRE:** The mysterious green kitten of North Jutland. **ABOVE:** What shall we do with a shrunken sailor? Perhaps identify the supposedly tiny cursed skeleton as a pre-term fœtus.

claims a small pride.[20] In South Africa, we learn of an attempt to breed replica Quaggas using modern day zebras; they've made progress.[21] And Japanese Professor Goto seeks to recreate the woolly mammoth using sperm entombed in the permafrost; scientists are still trying.[22]

We learn that guinea pigs were once prized by the Incas as a gourmet delicacy. Former jazz drummer Peter Gurney cares for over 60 of the little creatures in his South London flat. Before they entered his life, he tells us, he was just "marking time".

At a cat wedding in Thailand, two pussies with the rare optical defect known as 'diamond eye' are joined in holy matrimony – and to bring their owner luck and over £40,000 worth of gifts. A green furred kitten causes a stir in North Jutland; the exact cause of its unusual pigmentation is not pinned down. Lastly, four radioactive kitties are born in the San Onofre nuclear power plant.[23] I have it on good authority that there were feral cats living "within the wire" at the UK's former nuclear research facility at Harwell, at least until the early 2000s. These animals were descended from the pets kept by the RAF officers once stationed there.

Finally we round things off with two "electric ladies": Jacqueline Priestman and Sally Wallbank, who destroy lightbulbs and send various household appliances haywire. "Electric women have existed for two hundred years," Fanthorpe tells us authoritatively. (Mark Pilkington dated the earliest case to 1837 in a 2004 *Guardian* article.) [24]

Cue Albert Budden, an electromagnetic researcher with a supposedly rational take on electrical fields, power lines and mysterious hotspots. Is he the same sober boffin who once published *Psychic Close Encounters* and *Allergies and Aliens* I wonder?

Good news! After several failed attempts at a cure, Jacqueline discovers that eating onions helps manage her condition, although she now has new powers of premonition to worry about, having predicted the Lockerbie bombing in a doodle. Meanwhile, spare a thought for Sally, who has to sleep in a haunted house to get any relief, counting on the ghosts to disperse her pent up electrical energies.

And that's it. Fanthorpe's good friend Alf is back for "The Extinct Animals Song". (It sounds like a vaguely familiar hymn that I can't quite place; if you can, send details to the letters page!)

EPISODE NINE

This is officially the final episode (Episode 10 is a 'Best Of' clip show). Fanthorpe quotes Churchill's "end of the beginning speech", before taking us to the Devon fishing village of Brixham to investigate the curse of the shrunken sailor. This tiny 18th century skeleton brings doom to all who possess it, and psychic investigator Graham Wyley claims his considerable powers are

A BLURRY FIGURE IN PERIOD COSTUME SEEMS TO BE WATCHING; I THINK HE LOOKS LIKE JON PERTWEE

the only thing keeping the curse at bay. Local medium Margaret Barratt spins us a tale aboard a transatlantic slave ship, and links the shrinking curse to the revenge of a tribal witch doctor. According to Brixham's *Herald Express*, a Home Office pathologist has identified the skeleton as a pre-term fœtus.[25] You can find out more about the curious Mr Wyley, who also claimed to be a NASA contractor, in various online articles.[26]

Viewer Martin Emmett sends in a spooky home movie of his daughter's riding lesson at Cobham Manor in Kent, near the historic Pilgrim's Way linking Winchester to Canterbury. A blurry figure in "period costume" appears to be watching; I think he looks like Jon Pertwee.

In Leeds, Oscar the Labrador can soothe your stress and hypnotise even the most sceptical student at his sold-out performances. It seems to slip Fanthorpe's mind to mention that Oscar's owner is a professional magician and hypnotist himself.[27]

Next, Thailand and the "incredible" floating nun of Kanchanaburi (we do seem

TOP: The ghost of Worzel Gummidge interrupts a child's riding lesson. **ABOVE:** In episode seven, Fanthorpe sings "The Mummy Song" apparently buried up to his neck in sand.

TOP: Don't look into the eyes of Oscar the hypnotic labrador! **CENTRE:** Thailand's floating nun of Kanchanaburi. **ABOVE:** The Virgin Mary weeps tears of male blood (and brings in pleny of lira) at Civitavecchia, Italy.

to spend far less time in the Far East than we did with Arthur C Clarke). I note the aforementioned nun only discovered her floating powers at this particular temple pool, so I suspect a non-mysterious solution like the salt in the Dead Sea. Travel blogger Mike Thailandee visited recently, but he didn't want to pay the high entry fee to watch the floating show.[28]

Civitavecchia in Italy, and another tourist trap, as a statue of the Virgin Mary weeps tears of what turns out to be *male* blood. Two hotels and a new shopping precinct were planned for the millennium. Fanthorpe tells us a further 13 statues had started weeping across Italy, apparently in competition. Accusations of "pious fraud" were investigated by the Italian authorities.[29] Just last year tears of (pigs'?) blood began raining from another statue outside the city.[30]

We conclude with Rachel, Vampire Marchioness of Toronto. Fanthorpe charts the glamorisation of the undead, from their origin as murderous cadavers to the far sexier figures of late 20th century film and fiction (if only he'd seen the *Twilight Saga*.) We are assured that Rachel drinks blood for spiritual, not nutritional, sustenance, and she traces her vampire lineage back to Adam's first wife, Lilith, now something of a feminist icon.[31]

Vlad the Impaler, Elizabeth Bathory and the murderous French alchemist Gilles de Rais are all accused of historical vampirism and all have their modern defenders. I note the recent claims in these pages that Vlad may actually have been vegan (**FT440:10**).

At the time of broadcast there were apparently 15,000 members of these vampire cults across the United States, served by a dedicated vampire cable channel. Dentists had begun advertising custom-made fangs on the Internet. Our obsession with vampires seems to be ongoing and impossible to kill – witness a 2022 article about the Vampire King of New Orleans.[32]

After expressing some suitably fortean doubt as to whether he'll be back for another series of the programme, Fanthorpe and Alf wrap things up with their "Ode to *Fortean TV*" (it's "Auld Lang Syne").

CONCLUSIONS

Last month I asked whether a figure like Lionel Fanthorpe seems all the weirder to us now in a world where everything must be either fervently believed in or angrily dismissed. We seem, at least in the English speaking world, to have lost the ability to suspend our judgment and embrace uncertainty. It's perhaps ironic that as a culture that has happily embraced sexual and gender liberation, we seem to have become so much more binary in almost everything else.

On the other hand, is Fanthorpe's open-minded approach inescapably tied to the 1990s? Is he an example of centrist complacency and the "both-sides"

ABOVE: Rachel, the vampiric "Marchioness of Toronto", draws blood from consenting Canadians for her spiritual sustenance

worldview that Generation Z argues we can no longer afford on a planet threatened by existential challenges and feuding tribes?

Or is the bald old priest just a man on a motorcycle, laughing gently as he rides with us across "that thin crust known as reality"?

For the first part of Ryan Shirlow's Fortean TV rewatch, see **FT448:28-35**. For an interview with Lionel Fanthorpe, see "Godfella", **FT107:34-36**. For an account of Lionel's earlier career as a science fiction writer, see Andrew May, "Fanthorpe's Fortean Fiction", **FT297:38-42**. For Ken Campbell's thoughts on *Fortean TV*, see **FT98:47**.

NOTES

1 www.nytimes.com/2023/05/17/science/human-origins-africa.html

2 https://apnews.com/article/neanderthals-denisovans-ancient-humans-dna-e671a140b75fab3791fbd1c4b

3 https://cfz.org.uk/

4 https://primarilyprimates.org/news/the-life-and-times-of-oliver-a-chimpanzee-2/

5 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9545080/

6 www.chron.com/life/article/oliver-chimpanzee-with-humanlike-traits-dies-3608813.php

7 www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3bbmbwvkbo

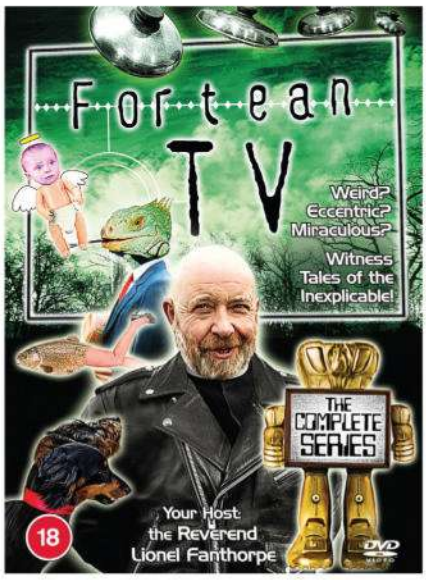
8 www.afro.who.int/health-topics/malaria

9 https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/19/world/mosquito-human-body-odor-malaria-scn/index.html

10 www.wharfedaleobserver.co.uk/features/15022133.dark-side-of-cottingley-fairy-hoax-by-family-of-the-man-who-exposed-it/

11 www.summum.us/about/corkybio.shtml, www.summum.us/mummification/sanctuary.shtml

12 https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?itype=NGPSID&id=12812615



13 www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666154322001764

14 www.mineralien.co.at/en/index.html. There are various UK resellers, but FT offers no endorsement or medical advice! Curiously, there doesn't seem to be any reference to Schindele's original vision amongst all the regurgitated scientific data

15 You can read more about the Irish abbot here: www.ncregister.com/blog/st-columba-and-the-loch-ness-monster

16 This article contains a useful timeline of sightings and reports: www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/story-sightings-mystery-sea-creature-4092252.

17 https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/tetrapod-zoology/photos-of-the-loch-ness-monster-revisited/

18 www.ramtha.com. According to her website, JZ was born in 1946 in Roswell, New Mexico.

19 www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2014/ramtha-riled. It cites the usual humdrum New Age mix of racism, antisemitism and homophobia. And if you have the time to go down a conspiracy rabbit hole, also try searching for 'Ramtha' and 'Trump' – enjoy!

20 www.belfastcity.gov.uk/zoo/news-and-events/news/lord-mayor-opens-new-kingdom-at-belfast-zoo!

21 https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/25/africa/quagga-project-zebra-conservation-extinct-south-africa/

22 www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/mammoth-elephant-hybrids-could-be-created-within-the-decade-should-they-be

23 www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-02-08-mn-33724-story.html

24 www.theguardian.com/science/2004/jul/29/science.research1

25 www.dashper.net.nz/whatshallwedo.htm

26 www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/6637753.meet-ghostbuster-saw-first-spook-aged-six/; www.watfordobserver.co.uk/news/5780498.psychic-channels-energy-into-dealing-with-tv-challenges/

27 www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/jul/20/hugh-lennon-obituary

28 www.thailandee.com/en/visit-thailand/wat-tham-mangkon-thong-kanchanaburi-521

29 www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2000/dec/09/weekend7.weekend1

30 www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/11/the-saint-leaves-italian-town-after-case-opened-into-statues-tears-of-blood

31 https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lilith

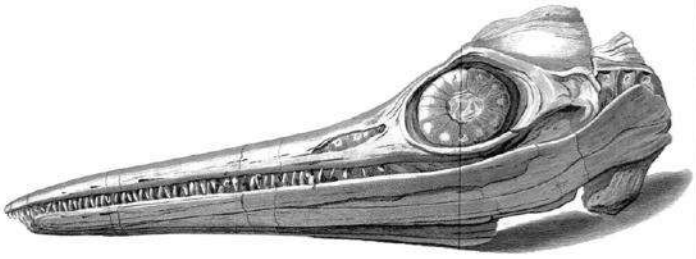
32 https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/29/us/real-vampires-new-orleans-atlanta-cec/index.html

RYAN SHIRLOW is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His latest production is a spooky children's audio drama, *The Automatic Leprechaun*, available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com

VIZ
SUBSCRIBE TO BRITAIN'S THIRD OR FOURTH FUNNIEST MAGAZINE
WHY IS it that, when people see a ghost, it's always a lady in a grey dress, slowly walking down the stairs? Why is it never a middle-aged, balding man in a tank top pottering about in the shed? Come on, ghosts. Try to show a bit of diversity.
Reginald Meringue, Luton
SUBSCRIBE NOW
shop.viz.co.uk/vizxftcm

Mary Anning and the Sea Dragon

MATT SALUSBURY asks if one of palæontology's most sensational finds was originally named after a lethal cryptid from a 1749 edition of *The Gentlemen's Magazine*…



LEFT: The *Ichthyosaurus* skull discovered by Joseph Anning in 1811. Mary (pictured below) subsequently found its neck and torso.

Among the great stories from the history of palæontology is that of how Mary Anning, then aged 12, together with her brother, discovered the first identified prehistoric marine reptile. Mary's brother Joseph found the skull of what became known as *Ichthyosaurus* in the cliffs between their native Lyme Regis and Charmouth in 1811. From the time of Joseph's discovery of the skull, the name "sea dragon" attached itself to the find – apparently because of its many sharp teeth and its big eye sockets.

After the Annings' discovery of the skull, Mary found the neck and partial torso of the same animal the following year. Although the Anning family had been on the poor relief, they managed to raise funds to pay labourers to dig out the fossil that November. The Annings sold the skeleton of the "sea dragon" to lord of the manor Henry Hoste Henley for the princely sum of £23, enough to lift the family out of poverty. The fossil found its way to Bullock's Museum of Picadilly. It was later auctioned off to Charles Konig of the British Museum, where it caused a sensation.

The scientific establishment was forced to accept that animals had once walked the Earth, or swum its seas, that bore scant resemblance to anything still alive in the 1820s. This allowed people to contemplate the immense span of time that had passed since the "sea dragon" lived – far longer than allowed for in a world created on 22 October 4004 BC, as calculated by Archbishop Ussher of Armagh. The "sea dragon" undermined the prevailing orthodoxy which held that all animals were created as part of God's plan.

"It has two large fins, which serve it both to swim and to fly"

Various official names for the beast discovered by the Annings were suggested, including the grand-sounding *Proteosaurus*. But the official name *Ichthyosaurus* ("fish lizard"), Konig's idea, finally stuck. One of the earliest life reconstructions of *Ichthyosaurus* was in Thomas Hawkins' *Book of the Great Sea Dragons – Ichthysauri and Plesiosauri, gadolim, taninim, of Moses*. This appeared in 1840, so the "sea dragon" terminology was still in use some 30 years later.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1810, just before the Annings' discovery, featured an entry for "SEA-Dragon". This quotes an article in that fortean favourite *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1749 describing an encounter "between Orford and Southwold" on the Suffolk coast with a "monster of a very singular nature". In the words of a witness who'd seen the creature's corpse, its "head and tail… resemble those of an alligator; it has two large fins, which serve it both to swim and to fly… shaped like those which painters have given to dragons… Its body is covered with impenetrable scales; its legs have two joints, and its feet are hoofed like those of an ass: it has five rows of very white and sharp teeth in its jaw and is in length about four feet [1.22m]."

The *Britannica* entry recorded how two fishermen captured the animal after a struggle in which one fisherman had two fingers bitten off and died soon after. As the "sea dragon" was brought ashore, it escaped, flew 50 yards and lacerated another man's arm with its bite before it was battered to death with a boathook. The entry for "sea dragon" was still in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in its 1823 edition. *Suffolk Ghosts and Legends* quotes another *Gentleman's Magazine* article of 1750 that describes a living "Suffolk monster" exhibited in London. Possibly an attempt to cash in on the previous year's "sea dragon," this monster looked suspiciously like a seal or sea lion.

Mary Anning is known to have been an autodidact who as an adult borrowed the latest natural history journals and laboriously copied out their articles. So could Mary have been inspired by the sea dragon *Britannica* entry in naming it? Lyme Regis was already a seaside resort where the well-to-do holidayed for the "sea bathing", while *Britannica* was for some a much-used work of reference. So it's not hard to imagine a conversation involving a holidaymaker visiting Lyme Regis and remarking on the similarity between Mary Anning's new discovery and the story of a spikey, bitey flying monster that had mauled a fisherman off the Suffolk coast half a century earlier – a story so extraordinary that they'd remembered it from *Britannica*.

In recent years, popular science media has revived the term "sea dragon" to describe ichthyosaurs, the BBC's 2018 documentary *Attenborough and the Sea Dragon* – about another ichthyosaur, whose huge skull was discovered on Britain's Jurassic coast – being an example. Presumably, the current vogue for rebranding ichthyosaurs as more accessible-sounding "sea dragons" is because *Ichthyosaurus* is near-impossible to either spell or pronounce.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia Britannica Vol XIX, 1823, which quotes extensively from *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1749. The 1823 *Britannica* entry for the sea-dragon is near identical to that in the 1810 edition,

Pamela Brooks, *Suffolk Ghosts and Legends*, Halsgrove, 2009, has a retelling of the story which quotes the 1810 *Britannica*.

MATT SALUSBURY is a regular FT contributor and author of *Mystery Animals of Suffolk* (Leiston Press, 2013).

Are the best ufologists... ufologists?

NEIL NIXON argues that many of the most significant contributions to ufology have come from outside the field itself. Discuss.

Back in April I offered a "polemical" webinar arguing that "some of the most meaningful contributions to ufology were by people who never set out to be ufologists." [1] I'm not condemning any of FT's UFO investigators here; without the likes of Jenny Randles, David Clarke and Andy Roberts my life would have been poorer. I'm saying any definition of "best" ufologists should include those who have demonstrably contributed to progress in the field, added to our understanding and moved investigations on for others to build on.

Wikipedia notes that "ufology is generally regarded by skeptics and science educators as an example of pseudoscience," [2] an opinion expressed in an award-winning essay by James Oberg in *New Scientist* in 1979. [3] 20 years later, I revisited his arguments for the annual *Fortean Studies* anthology, noting: "Oberg's criticisms were intended to focus ufology on the problems with a view to solving them." [4] The last quarter of a century hasn't changed my view, but it has brought the Internet and with it much succinct and constructive scepticism to the subject. I'd single out Brian Dunning and his *Skeptoid* podcast in this regard; he marked World UFO Day 2024 with an episode reiterating many solid scientific reasons to be sceptical, notably the fact that "astrophysicists and astrobiologists know quite a lot about the science of interstellar travel, and everything we've learned tells us it's not going to happen." [5] None of which rules out alien spacecraft, though it suggests a likelihood of them being controlled remotely.

STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY / KARL NORDLUND

William James's work informs present-day UFO experience

You could argue that Beatriz Villarroel, Assistant Professor of Physics, Stockholm University, is a ufologist. In April she gave the Mitchell Lecture at the Physics Festival at Texas A&M, effectively a scientific prize, presenting on "Vanishing Stars and the Hunt for Extraterrestrial Artifacts". [6] Her current work involves scanning astronomical photographs of the night sky from before 4 October 1957 (when Sputnik launched) for satellite trails, crudely looking for evidence of objects behaving like satellites before Earth had any of its own. Sporadic but exciting discoveries include nine sources from one plate in April 1950 (possibly fallout from undeclared nuclear testing) and intriguingly three bright "stars", since vanished, visible on 19 July 1952 (see **FT421:7, 442:24-25**) – a significant ufological date since it was the first of two consecutive Saturdays of the "Washington overflights" case. Villarroel stated in a TEDx talk in March 2023: "There is no astronomical explanation for this type of event." [7]

Another expert in search of a subject is Garrett Graff. His CV boasts editorship of *Politico* magazine, a stint as Editor-in-Chief of *Washingtonian* magazine, time spent as an instructor at Georgetown University in the Master's in Professional Studies Journalism and Public Relations programme and the small matter of being a Pulitzer Prize finalist for his work *Watergate: A New History* (2022). Graff's reputation rests on significant investigative journalism. He's one of the few such journalists to gravitate to ufology. His weighty *UFO: The Inside Story of the Government's Search for Alien Life Here – and Out There* (2023) offers 544 pages or 18 hours and 16 minutes of audio.

LEFT: Phsyics professor Beatriz Villarroel – arguably a ufologist? **FACING PAGE:** Kimberley Barrington Frost, the Sheffield heating engineer and rock musician who discovered he was a reincarnated Egyptian pharaoh in touch with ancient aliens.

He's reporting on the people and progress in the area over decades, much as he previously presented an overview of political machinations. Predictably, the evidence Earth has been visited by aliens gets a roasting, and the diligent but frequently frustrating work of the SETI scientists shows a logical progression. The big takeaway – for me at least – is how robustly some of the "new ufology" ideas relating to altered states of consciousness emerge from this epic overview. Graff is more observer than engager and concludes, "Determining the line between science fiction and science fact has always been the core of the UFO story," before leaving the final word to Alex Dietrich (a US fighter pilot involved in filming one of the "Pentagon Video" UFO incidents). She states: "They [i.e. those investigating UFOs] enjoy the anticipation more than actually finding answers." [8]

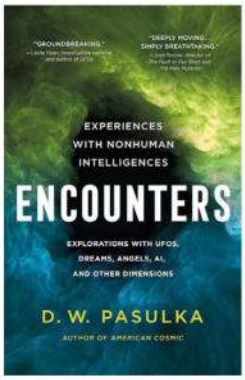
Generally, ufologists welcome the visits of figures like Garrett Graff to their community, less so the moments when effective hoaxers expose the credulity of UFO proponents. My webinar considered crop circle creators Doug Bower and Dave Chorley, Gulf Breeze mainstay Ed Walters and Patrick Moore's leading part in the gleefully surreal book *Flying Saucer from Mars* (**FT172:22, 298:26, 334:28-29, 370:33**). Though, in terms of a contribution to ufology it's cases like the Cradle Hill UFO Hoax of 1969/1970 (**FT331:40-47**) that are most telling. Scientifically minded sceptics hoaxed a skywatch near Warminster. Some watchers thought they saw a cylindrical object and soon "blobs of light on a two-dimensional negative were

being interpreted, through the filter of belief, as three-dimensional objects." [9]

"The filter of belief" cited above is a subject for separate study, but considering those who have contributed to ufology from the outside would be incomplete without addressing popular culture across various media playing with the ideas and imagery that shape our beliefs. There are eccentrically extreme cases. My webinar cited the work of Kimberley Barrington Frost (AKA Ramases), who went from being a Sheffield heating engineer to a rock musician, believing himself to be the reincarnation of an Egyptian pharaoh with a complex message about ancient astronauts (**FT244:33-34**). A glance at the cover of *Space Hymns* (1971) gives some insight, apparently showing a rocket launch. A closer look reveals the blasting of the steeple of St George's Church, Stockport (a plank of Ramases's cosmology being that church design was directly inspired by ancient alien visits). More prosaically, the direct influence of mass media on UFO experience appears possible and one detailed argument presented by Martin Kottmeyer suggests the hypnotically "recovered" memories of Barney Hill relating to a classic abduction case were inspired by his recent viewing of an episode of *The Outer Limits*, which featured aliens similar in appearance to the grey types reported in the Hills' encounter (**FT322:46-48, 384:44-47**). [10]

I'm not claiming every professionally employed mythmaker is a ufologist, but their work has shaped everything from individual paranormal experiences to the expectations of investigators. A useful counterpoint to this situation comes from those who have helped us to understand the strangest human experiences. William James's work predates modern ufology by decades, but I'd argue *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; see **FT336:50-51**) informs present-day UFO experience, if only because James codified mystical experiences, seeing four identifiers: such

experiences are "ineffable" (i.e., more about feeling than intellect), "noetic" (i.e., capable of imparting knowledge), "transient" (here and gone rapidly) and "passive" (because they typically find us when we aren't seeking them). [11] Since returning to live speaking, researching and writing on UFOs in the last few years I've heard many eye-witness accounts. The specifics, craft seen, nature of any intelligence encountered and so on always vary: the consistency in the reports lies at the level of impact on the witness, frequently the sense that they underwent encounters showing them their notions of normality/reality were too narrow. Crudely, these are mystical experiences, so too are several of the most surreal and durable UFO experiences, like the case of Alfred Burtoo (**FT198:29, 238:22**) who, fishing on a canal bank near Aldershot encountered a UFO and beings in the early hours of 12 August 1983. Venturing aboard he was asked his age. Stating he was approaching his 78th birthday he was dismissed because he was "too old and infirm for our purpose"; soon afterwards he "was happily chasing fish when the object departed with a bright glow. The glow was so bright it allowed Burtoo to see his float bobbing near the far bank of the canal." [12] There's an unreal collision for me between the absurdity of the brief abduction and the normality of the aftermath as Burtoo calmly continues fishing as the craft departs.



Some current academic work is serving ufology well. Diana Pasulka, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, discovered a few years ago that levels of belief in God among Americans were roughly equivalent to levels of belief in alien visitations. The resulting book, *American Cosmic* (2019), completes an investigation to understand why, and *Encounters: Experiences with Nonhuman Intelligences* (2023) reviews the work of those at the forefront of contacting intelligences as we might not know them. Both have a lot to say that is relevant to current UFO investigations; so too the work of Avi Loeb and Frank B Baird Jr, Professor of Science at Harvard University. Loeb's *Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth* (2021) argues that the object christened 'Oumuamua which passed through the Solar System in 2017 (**FT362:24, 363:13** and passim) may have been an alien probe, possibly a large solar sail. The subsequent I*nterstellar: The Search for Extraterrestrial Life and Our Future Beyond Earth* (2023) argues the merits of his work, including The Galileo Project investigation of near-Earth objects and the retrieval of physical evidence that has crashed to Earth. In the UK, philosopher Philip Goff, Associate Professor & Director of UG & PG Student Experience University of Durham, argues – notably in *Why? The Purpose of the Universe* (2023) – that panpsychism (put simply, the notion that consciousness pervades everything in the Universe) could explain many anomalies currently perplexing theoretical physics. His arguments are – literally – cosmic, but also offer a simplistic but promising explanation for the endless ufological conundrum of sincere reports, consistent at the level of experience and wildly inconsistent in surface detail. And then, established astronomy remains the likeliest route to the first confirmation of some form of alien life. It was the James Webb Space Telescope that discovered K2-18b, an enigmatic exo-planet that may just be showing evidence of a biosignature, and therefore, simple life.

Little of this is ufology as most people know it, but much of it may hold important truths that inform the subject.

NOTES

1 Neil Nixon, "Are the Best Ufologists, All Ufologists?", ASSAP Webinar 25 April 2024: webinarhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08q6BT6owg4&t=3525s

2 Obviously the page could have been edited since I wrote this, but my bet is they still use the word "pseudoscience": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ufology

3 James Oberg, "The Failure of the Science of Ufology", *New Scientist*, 11 Oct 1979.

4 Neil Nixon, "Ufology – A Qualified Success?" in Steve Moore (ed), *Fortean Studies*, Vol. 5, John Brown Publishing, 1999, pp 96-121.

5 Brian Dunning, "The Aliens are not Coming", *Skeptoid* #943, 2 July 2024: https://skeptoid.com/episodes/4943

6 Beatriz Villarroel's website: http://beatrizvillarroel.com/

7 Beatriz Villaroel, "Why we should search for alien artefacts", TEDx talk, March 2023: https://www.ted.com/talks/beatriz_villarroel_why_we_should_search_for_alien_artifacts

8 Garrett Graff, *UFO: The Inside Story of the US Government's Search for Alien Life Here – and Out There*, Simon and Schuster, 2023, p.438.

9 David Clark and Andy Roberts, *Flying Saucerers: A Social History of UFOlogy*, Alternative Albion, 2007, p.153.

10 Martin Kottmeyer, "Entirely Unpredisposed: The Cultural Background of UFO Abduction Reports", *Magonia*, January 1990.

11 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Penguin Classics, 1985, pp.379-382.

12 Neil Nixon, *UFOs, Aliens and the Battle for the Truth*, Oldcastle Books, 2020, pp.102-103.

NEIL NIXON is a former academic now working as a live speaker and writer with a lifelong interest in all things fortean. His website is www.neilnixon.com/

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

For anyone with a sense of adventure, an enquiring mind and a love of the weird and wonderful...

Every month, ForteanTimes takes you on an incredible journey into the unknown where you'll encounter some of the most fantastic phenomena on Earth... and sometimes beyond.

CHOOSE YOUR FORTEAN TIMES PRINT SUBSCRIPTION... THEN CHOOSE YOUR FREE GIFT!

6 MONTHS - GET A FREE ISSUE
OR
12 MONTHS - GET FREE FT EARBUDS

GREAT REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE

- A free issue of Fortean Times with a 6-month subscription*
- Free earbuds on a 1-year subscription*
- Free delivery of every issue
- Save on the cover price
- Every issue delivered before its available to buy in shops

ORDER TODAY!

QUOTING THE OFFER CODE **FT449P**

shop.forteantimes.com/ft449p

hello@metropolis.co.uk

020 8752 8195

* The offers are applicable to either a 6-month print subscription with direct debit payment or a 1-year print subscription payable by credit card/debit card or direct debit. If you wish to cancel the direct-debit offer, please contact us via phone or email. The offer is only valid for new UK customers, one per household, and while stocks last. Please allow 28 days for delivery of the gift.

TO SEND REVIEW COPIES, CONTACT THE BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR AT DVBARRETT@FORTEANTIMES.COM

Witch hunts and moral panics

The Satanic Ritual Abuse allegations of the 1980s and 1990s were the direct precursors of today's wild claims by QAnon, but this very belated account could have been so much better, says **Mike Dash**

Satanic Panic

A Modern Myth

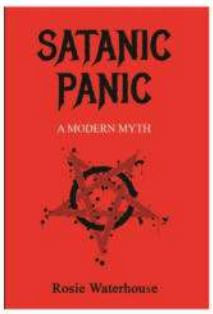
Rosie Waterhouse

Independently published (Amazon) 2023
Pb, 190pp, £6.99, ISBN 9798870691497

The longest and most expensive criminal trial in American legal history was not some sensational prosecution for murder. It was a mostly-forgotten 1980s case from California that lasted for seven years, cost $15m, secured zero convictions – and has a great deal to teach forteans about the topics that interest us. Indeed, looking back from the vantage point of 40 years, it's possible to argue that the McMartin Preschool trial is foundational to any attempt to explore the intersections between claims and reality, belief and evidence.

McMartin was Ground Zero for the great "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s and early 1990s – a whole series of cases that occurred across the English-speaking world, from the US to the UK, Canada to New Zealand. Each involved allegations of the ritual abuse of children, generally for the apparent purpose of harnessing occult power. Most involved claims of the most baroque and implausible kind. Judy Johnson, one of the mothers involved in the McMartin case, claimed that Peggy Buckey, the woman who had founded the daycare centre, had forced her young son to watch a baby being beheaded as a sacrifice, and that he was then forced to drink its blood. There were stories of extensive tunnel systems excavated under the school, filled with ritual paraphernalia and the remains of hundreds of animal sacrifices; in other cases, children who spoke to social workers and child protection activists told of seeing huge tanks containing live sharks, or large-scale orgies held in the open air on beaches in the depths of a West Wales winter.

What makes these cases truly frightening, though, was the way that allegations, made without any shred of plausible evidence, destroyed dozens of families and ruined hundreds of lives. The police, for the most part, remained sceptical – they were never able to find the tunnels, the shark tanks, the dead bodies that must have been produced by the hundreds, or any trace of the blood spilled by the gallon in rituals that were supposed to have been conducted across multiple generations. The social workers and child protection people, on the other hand – many of them, it turned out, Evangelical Christians who fervently believed in the existence of real evil and a real Satan – rallied behind the slogan "Believe the Children", and argued that the child witnesses were too young and too innocent to make these stories up.



Gradually, the evidence did receive some scrutiny. Transcripts of witness interviews showed clearly how frequently children were asked spectacularly leading questions, or offered carrot-and-stick choices between denying that they had ever seen anything untoward (in which case, they were promised, they would simply be questioned again, and indefinitely), and confirmation of the allegations – in which case, in at least one instance, they were promised a ride in a helicopter. The physical evidence turned out to be pathetically mundane – police seized a motley selection of Hallowe'en masks, graduation robes and, in the McMartin case, even a rubber duck as possible evidence of Devil-worship.

They were never able to find the tunnels, the shark tanks, the dead bodies or the blood

Most of this important scrutiny was done by journalists, among whom Rosie Waterhouse, then of the *Independent on Sunday* newspaper, deserves (and here claims) particular credit. *Satanic Panic*, her very belated account of investigations she began around 1990 and has continued ever since, explains how she started out naïve and (despite a background on the *Sunday Times*'s celebrated Insight team of investigative reporters) uncritical of claims publicised by apparently authoritative groups such as the NSPCC; how she became sceptical, investigated, and eventually compiled her series of bombshell exposés of the activist investigators, shoddy evidence, psychological pressure and, in some cases, real malice that combined to produce wild claims and some false memories. Her book is based on an academic thesis, and comprises a roughly 30,000-word introduction to reprints of the work she has published over the years – which are not included in the book but are the basis of a doctorate based on prior publication, rather than original research.

The value of *Satanic Panic* rests squarely on its author's central position in the development of the panic, at least in the UK (she credits other writers with having played similar roles in the US). Her long involvement with the story means she is in a good position to point out how the wild stories of the 1980s are the direct precursors of the claims made nowadays by QAnon and other modern conspiracy theorists. Her book deserves a place in the library of anyone with a serious interest in witch-hunts, moral panics and fortean "flaps" of any kind.

But it could have been far better than it is. The nature of any thesis focused on prior publication is that it repeatedly requires the author to stop writing about their subject in order to make clams for their own significance and originality. This may not be Waterhouse's fault, but it gets tiresome, and such passages might have been edited out for publication. Similarly, and more worryingly, Waterhouse was apparently not expected to back up any of her – now pretty ancient – journalism with ideas or theory drawn from academic sources.

In consequence, and except where she did so at the time of original writing, Waterhouse has barely spoken to historians, sociologists, specialists in psychology or memory, or anyone else whose theories or research might have helped her to contextualise or develop her own analysis. The book also lacks an index.

I've been an admirer of Waterhouse's work on the Satanic Panic ever since the early 1990s. She deserves great credit for swimming against strong currents to follow evidence where it actually led. When a full history of the panic is finally written, she will have a prominent place in it. She could have written that history herself, though – few people are in a better position to do so – and it's a shame she didn't.

★★★

A decadent delight

Ian Simmons enjoys topless barmaids, coffin dining tables and human bone chandeliers

Cabarets of Death

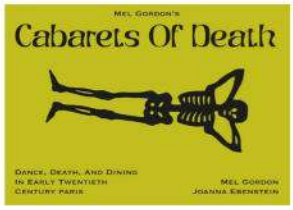
Death, Dance and Dining in Early 20th Century Paris

Mel Gordon & Joanna Ebenstein

Strange Attractor Press 2024

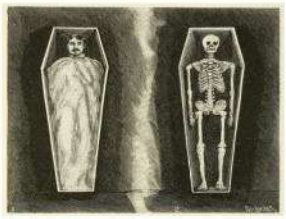
Pb, £25, 175pp, ISBN 9781907222269

In London and other British cities, the Dungeon chain of attractions has, for many years, cheerfully satisfied the public's appetite for immersive horror, torture, gore and questionable taste. An obvious precursor is Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors, but from the late 19th century, another ancestor thrived in Paris – the Cabarets of Death.



While today the popular image of *fin de siècle* Paris is all sunny impressionist languor and Moulin Rouge jolliness, at the time, symbolist gloom and absinthe-fuelled decadence were at least as high profile. One manifestation was these cabarets.

Situated across the street from each other in Montmartre and entered through flamboyantly gothic facades, the *Cabarets du Néant, du Ciel* and *L'Enfer* (Nothingness, Heaven and Hell) purveyed grotesque horror imagery, interactive shock trickery, titillating nudity, Grand Guignol-inspired performances,



decadent cocktails and fine(ish) dining to an enthusiastic clientele.

Founded in the early 1890s, the cabarets survived until the 1950s. Described as "buffoonishly cynical interactive chapels of anti-clericism and blasphemy", they spawned imitators in Belgium, the US and Germany (one of the first acts of the Nazis

on coming to power was to shut the Berlin one) and inspired grind shows and burlesques worldwide, all the while being ignored by "respectable" cultural history as cheap, tacky, and low class.

Aleister Crowley was a dedicated patron during his youthful phase as a decadent symbolist poet in the city, attending the cabarets with his then fiancée Eileen Gray, later a noted modernist designer, and they were loved by the Surrealists, who conducted sleep experiments in a room above the *Cabaret du Néant*.

Gordon and Ebenstein's book, quite rightly, is light on text and lets copious images from

the cabarets tell their story, making it an utter delight. It is packed with pictures of cigarette girls with skull-bedecked trays, topless barmaids serving "Hell Cocktails", engravings of "satanic torture", performers transforming into "rotting corpses", coffin dining tables and restaurants lit with human bone chandeliers.

It is an indulgent, decadent delight that makes you wish you could still visit the cabarets – although Viktor Wynd's splendid museum and absinthe parlour in Hackney that hosted the book's launch and tie-in exhibition perhaps comes close.

★★★★★

Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Counter-cultural Fascism

The Origins and Afterlife of James Mason's Siege

Spencer Sunshine

Routledge 2024

Pb, 454pp, £25.99, ISBN 9780367190606

In the first half of his book sociologist Spencer Sunshine documents the fragmentation of George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party into often-feuding splinter groups: "totally out-of-touch, cultist, hobbyist, fetishist … weirdoes, freaks and geeks", according to fellow neo-Nazi James Mason, the focus for the rest of the book.

Mason joined Rockwell's party in 1966, aged 14, but within a decade had largely rejected uniformed marches, instead cheerleading individual acts of violence against liberal, multicultural America, while waging war on consensus reality by declaring Charles Manson an "independent genius" and, along with Adolf Hitler, an avatar of Christ.

Mason's own zine, *Siege*, appeared almost monthly, in tiny runs, between 1980 and 1986. While his revolutionary vision was too much for many in the Neo-Nazi underground, it found an audience with the new wave of American counter-cultural extremophiles emerging from the nihilistic post-punk and industrial music scenes of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

One group, calling themselves the Abraxas Foundation, after the second-century gnostic deity, set about systematically promoting ideas of spiritual elitism and counter-cultural fascism to the anti-generation. Collectively their influence was formidable – author and musician Boyd Rice published with Re/Search and released music on the Mute label, also home to Depeche Mode. Books from Adam Parfrey's Feral House still sit on many of our bookshelves, while Michael Moynihan, whose account of the Norwegian Black Metal scene, *Lords of Chaos*, was hugely successful, would become an influencer in the American New Right. His entryist attempts to steer neo-pagan and esoteric cultures further towards traditionalism and spiritual elitism have seen him publish writings by FT associates including John Michell, Jocelyn Godwin and Nigel Pennick, alongside canonical New Right figures Julius Evola and Alan de Benoist. Others closely allied with Abraxas – like Greg Johnson and Jim Goad – today hold prominent positions in America's far right mediasphere.

While revelling in Mason's misanthropic extremism, publicly the Abraxas group remained coy about their allegiance to his neo-Nazism. But in private letters, as Sunshine shows, they expressed enthusiasm and support, manifested as action. Parfrey featured Mason's artwork alongside writing by another neo-Nazi mystic, Savitri Devi, in his 1987 anthology *Apocalypse Culture*, while in 1993 Moynihan took things further, editing and publishing a 434-page collection of *Siege* and other Mason texts, under the pseudonym MM Jenkins.

Although Moynihan's *Siege* collection was reprinted after its initial publication, Mason himself fell

into prison and obscurity, writing Aryan ancient astronaut tracts amongst other things, until his rediscovery by the Alt Right during the Trump presidency. Newly memified, *Siege* became the basis for Atomwaffen Division's short-lived campaign of stochastic terror, its founders being photographed with their new mentor.

After three decades, the Abraxas group succeeded in elevating a fellow bigot's tiny zine into a name to be hate-memed with, while fanning the flames of the Apocalypse Culture wars they helped to spark.

Mark Pilkington

★★★★

Mostly True

The West's Most Popular Hobo Graffiti Magazine (3rd edn)

Bill Daniel

Microcosm 2024

Pb, 190pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781621067429

The title of an old TV show about a wandering dog aside, the word "Hobo" to me conjures up visions of the 1930s depression dustbowl, FSA photography and Steinbeckian itinerants, but the railroad Hobo movement has been around from the late 19th century through to the 21st century.

In these pages which are filled with tales and tags of the Hobo artists daubing their individual signs on train boxcars, comics, vintage adverts and poetry of the tramping troubadours, Bill Daniel introduces us to the likes of Palm Tree Herby, The Colossus of Roads, Matokie Slaughter, Coal Train and numerous others. Some of the artists were wanderers, the others railroad employees.

But one name and question looms largest: "Who is Bozo Texino?" A simple yet striking sigil illustrating a smoking cowboy has appeared on many train cars provoking a mystery akin to the Toynbee Tiles or a boxcar Banksy regarding the identity of the creator. This question inspired the title of the 2005 documentary *Who is Bozo Texino?* created by the author of *Mostly True* (which I would recommend watching alongside reading this book).

The mystery is pretty much solved, but like the Chad/Kilroy Was Here graffiti prevalent since World War II, the Bozo Texino glyph has become a meme that has far outlived its original creator. The brim of the cowboy's hat resembles the mathematical symbol of an infinity loop which befits the longevity of this tag.

Hobo graffiti initially served as a code informing other itinerant workers of particular conditions – a symbol drawn or carved near a property could for instance alert "Beware of the Dog" or "Work to be found here". However it developed into a distinct form of American folk art. Whilst the life of migrant workers could certainly involve hard times there is a romanticism that has arisen around it and this book contributes to putting the "Boho" in "Hobo".

It may also be a testament to an artform that may vanish. Old-school paint-stick and crayon tags have sometimes been lost in the spray-can assault of modern graffiti and since the 1990s railroad operators have shown less tolerance towards all graffiti due to aerosol carpet-bombing obliterating serial numbers and other important information marked on the train trucks.

Mostly True may be something of a niche read; I personally approached it as an artist who participated in the 1990s mail art scene (so appreciated its zine aesthetic) and also as a former travelling carny, but it is an accessible and engaging read. It would most likely appeal to historians of rail as an offbeat aside, but also certainly to those with an interest in Outsider Art and Beat Americana.

Andy Paciorek

★★★★

Interspecies Communication

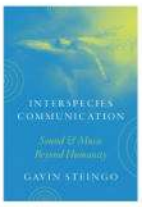
Sound and Music beyond Humanity

Gavin Steingo

University of Chicago Press 2024

Pb, 233pp, £22, ISBN 9780226831367

There is much more to communication than language. We all know this from our interactions with humans, and anyone who has ever been greeted at the door by a bouncing, tail-wagging



dog knows that humans and animals communicate meaningfully too. I myself would contend that language often confounds communication – but let that hobby-horse gallop on unridden for the moment. This communication with non-humans often does far more than convey data; it often gives rise to fury, frustration or love.

This all sounds trite, but it is much easier to assert it than to justify it, and much, much easier to assert it than to spell out its ethical and political corollaries. Those hard tasks are the business of this scintillating, infuriating, sassy, flawed, important and highly readable book. Steingo, professor of music at Princeton, is conspicuously smart and achingly well-read, and shares with many in the academy an unholy love of top-down theorising. Here, though, he oscillates – sometimes exhilaratingly and sometimes queasily – between the top-down and the bottom-up. Kant and Hegel jostle for space beside discussions of why dogs hump legs, the methods used to probe dolphin cognition, whether a musical phrase is really akin to a sentence, and the practicality of searching for extraterrestrial intelligence.

There are some curious, confidence-sapping omissions. Where is the evaluation of Carl Safina's sophisticated, empirically informed consideration of anthropomorphism as the best "first guess" as to what a non-human animal is feeling? Surely David Haskell's work on bird song deserves a mention?

But don't let this put you off. Steingo's book is best seen as an inquiry into the accessibility of otherness – an inquiry which is, perhaps, the substance of all novels worth reading. Nothing is more urgent, and Steingo is a remorseless and downright entertaining investigator. He demands that we shed our narcissistic and colonialist presumptions about the sorts of creatures we are and about how real relationships (rather than our habitual onanism) are forged and curated.

What would happen if we complied? The world would seem more mysterious. The old sclerotic certainties would dissolve, valency would erupt and the toxic self would be diluted. Empathy and humility – the prerequisites for personal happiness and ecological survival – would sprout, and our politics and morality would flourish. If we knew how to communicate with foxes and aliens we'd be better friends, parents and spouses. Steingo doesn't give us a step-by-step guide to this Brave New World, but he's stimulating company on the way.

Charles Foster

★★★★

The Missing Thread

A New History of the Ancient World Through the Women Who Shaped It

Daisy Dunn

Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2024

Hb, 480pp, £25, ISBN 9781474615617

Along with Mary Beard, Daisy Dunn is one of the two queens of British, nay world, Classics. Her previous game-changing books include ones on Catullus (also a translation), and the Elder and Younger Pliny; she also edits the Hellenic journal *Argo*.

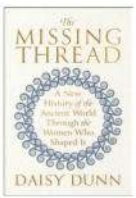
This new offering runs from Bronze Age Greece to 2nd-century AD Rome. The historical range is astounding, as is the erudition, lightly worn, conveyed in elegant and frequently witty prose (no academic jargon) that does far more to advance the female cause than the stale feminist rantings of such as Emily Southon (**FT244:52**). There are lots of women in the later Roman and Byzantine Empires who deserve bringing out of the margins into the centre.

Dunn gets off to a sensational start with her account of ancient claims in obscure authors of how Homer copied his poems from those of a mysterious woman well-named (Dunn thinks) Phantasia. This is something not previously spotlighted and bears upon the factual claim of Samuel Butler and fictional one of Robert Graves that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman.

One of Dunn's strengths is that she is not confined to the usual Græco-Roman straitjacket. If asked to name the earliest women poets, for example, most would say Sappho and struggle to come up with more. Dunn gives us two pages on the 3rd-century BC Sumerian Enheduanna, describing her "honey-sweet" hymns.

My favourite witticism is her comparison of Agrippa's and Augustus's buildings, dubbing the former "king of cement". She is also a dab hand at eye-catching chapter captions, most delicious being "The Rough-End of The Cheese-Grater" and "From the bed-sack to the Bed".

Were I to single out one chapter for special delight, it would be the one on Fulvia, formidable wife first of the notorious street-gangster-politician Clodius Pulcher, then of no less than Mark Antony – see too my own forthcoming column on this ferrous



female. There is one delightful, quasi-fortean pleasure here. We happen to possess a number of lead "bullets" from the siege of Persia where she was taking refuge. They are inscribed with such messages as "I seek Fulvia's clitoris" and "I seek Octavian's arsehole" – surely the choicest archæological evidences we could ever have…

Reviewing Dunn's book in the *TLS*, Emily Hauser dubs it "a fascinating romp through ancient Greek and Roman history". Indeed it is; but very much more. The only thing wrong with it was that it had to end.

Barry Baldwin

★★★★★

Deals with the Devil

Chris Hill examines how the long history of Faustian pacts in the arts reflects our never-ending love of transgressive tales

Devil's Contract

The History of the Faustian Bargain

Ed Simon

Melville House UK 2024

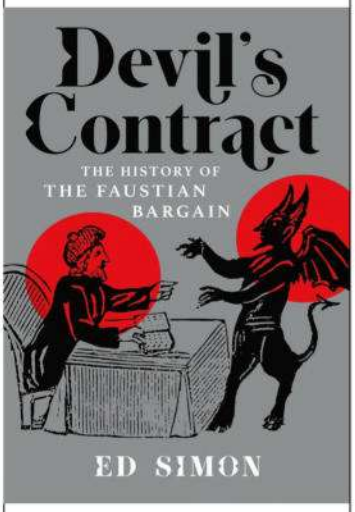
Hb, 272pp, £25, ISBN 9781685891046

At the heart of Ed Simon's book is a sad truth; we are a desultory species and one quite prepared to trade our humanity for profit and self-extinction. His investigation into this very human desire follows a historical, literary, and artistic trajectory and explores the cultural universalism of dealing with the Devil.

Starting with Simon Magus, a legendary character known only through sparse scriptural references and the Gnostic text, the *Testimony of Truth*, Simon identifies the primary source of later Faustian narratives. The archetypal magician, Simon Magus, in his quest to conquer nature entered into contractual agreement with supernatural agencies in full knowledge that the cost of his vanity might well be spiritual extinction. The ease with which demonic collusion then enters theological and philosophical discourse during the mediæval and Renaissance periods, Simon notes, foregrounds the idea of the pact as a significant cultural trope. Such characters as the necromancer Gerbert of Aurilliac (946-1003) – Pope Sylvester II (999-1003) – and the 13th century Benedictine monk, Herman the Recluse, whose Devil's Bible – the largest book in Christendom – are but two glossed by Simon.

He cites the historically delinquent character, Johann Georg Faust (1466/80-1541) as the primary source for later literary representations. An itinerant alchemist, tales of his dealings with supernatural entities became popular fare in late mediæval Europe and were published as *Das Faustbuch* (1587). Along with the increasing availability of magical texts in the 16th century it is likely that the playwright Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) found some inspiration in the many tales of Johann Faust's experiments; likewise, polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) in his version of the legend and generations of horror and fantasy writers since.

For Simon, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1602/4) offers an excursion into a protean modern subjectivity in its operatic scale and psychological insight. Anecdotally, the Elizabethan audience remained bewildered following the first performance in 1592, unsurprisingly as Marlowe had shifted the metaphysical goalposts. Challenging the repressive theocracy that dominated Elizabethan England, Marlowe's Faust questioned the belief that redemption was always a spiritual option. Damnation was a reality



he argued, and not necessarily bound in theological terms – the Faustian pact now offered an entrée into the unfettered id. Similarly, the significance of Goethe's *Faust* (1808/1832), Simon comments, marks a movement from the purely metaphysical realm to a secular landscape. The individual, freed of religious and social prohibition, has access to an unbounded and morally ambivalent agency; the Faustian pact, he suggests, is entered into with our own unconscious desires. Moving into the 20th century, Simon sees in the growth of totalitarianism a profoundly Faustian transaction and references how a modernist text such as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947) explores the rich tapestry that arises when ambition, power and identity commingle. He likewise notes the satirical potential of dealing with the Devil in the comic genius of the anti-Stalinist *The Master and Margarita* (written between 1928 and 1940) by Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940).

His treatment of the pact within art, cinema and music is no less thorough. A discussion of the erotically charged potential of paintings like *The Vision of Faust* by Luis Falero (1851-1896), for example, along with the mythic transformation of Bluesman Robert Johnson at the crossroads, he suggests, reflect the public's never-ending love of transgressive tales. With the dawn of the cinema the sky was the limit. The spectral visions of Marlowe and the demented workings of magicians everywhere could be rendered in technicolour by the Faustian auteurs of the Dream Factory. From *Nosferatu* (1922) to the present day, our appetite for all things demonic is insatiable.

Following the publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486, a period of persecution, misogyny and murder spread across Europe and North America, culminating in sites of abject suffering such as Salem, Massachusetts. The sheer ideological weight of religion and capitalism, Simon suggests, facilitates the turning of a blind eye to quite explicit deals with the Devil. His account of the very human cost of religious persecution and societal paranoia is a salutary reminder of our frequent moral ambiguity. Whether it is ecological disaster or AI, our acceptance of digital capitalism, he pronounces, may have gone over the tipping point. We appear to call on our personal Mephistopheles with frightening regularity – welcome to the Faustocene!

★★★★★

Paranormal Kent

Robert Bard

Amberley Publishing 2024

Pb, 96pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781398108028

There is an abundance of books of this type on the market and I have a fair few in my collection. These are succinct guides to local ghosts, hauntings and mysterious happenings that give the reader a flavour of an area through the lens of the paranormal.

This one is perhaps different in that the author sets out in his introduction that he is an historian with a sceptical and

cynical view of the paranormal but is willing to be convinced. Accordingly, he has highlighted ghostly tales from Kent that he says, "give him pause for thought". He has visited the many sites and places mentioned … so in some ways it is more like a tourist guide to historic and interesting sites with ghostly tales thrown in for good measure.

There are multiple mentions of the "most haunted village in England" – Pluckley, near Ashford. Despite his best efforts, the author did not see anything supernatural whilst walking the village ghost trail. However, he did take a photo of the Woodland Trust sign at the entrance to Dering Woods. This cheekily tells visitors not to call the "Ghostbusters" as the place is not haunted and paranormal groups are causing damage to the area. Any screaming that is heard, they suggest, is merely the result of foxes misbehaving.

Rochester, Canterbury and Tunbridge Wells are mentioned several times as well as individual churches, pubs and tea rooms. He also considers phenomena such as time slips and the Mothman-like "Bat Beast".

I did enjoy the book. It is very well illustrated – there are high quality colour photographs throughout – including some of alleged phenomena. There is no index but there are multiple footnotes citing sources. This is one of the better books of this type and you certainly get a sense of the author's healthy scepticism. Regrettably, the price for a slim paperback might make me think twice about purchasing.

Sue Hardiman

★★★

TO SEND REVIEW COPIES, CONTACT THE EDITOR AT DRSUTTON@FORTEANTIMES.COM

Starve Acre

Dir Daniel Kokotajlo, UK 2024
On general release

As the horror genre continues to thrive, so does the subgenre of folk horror, one that the British Isles and Ireland are particularly adept at producing.

In Daniel Kokotajlo's *Starve Acre*, based on the novel by Andrew Michael Hurley, we are transported back to the 1970s and introduced to young couple Richard and Juliette and their son Owen. Moving from Leeds to the Richard's old family farm in rural Yorkshire, they find that increasingly strange, and inevitably terrible, things begin to happen, resulting in Richard and Juliette gradually losing their grasp on reality as they wrestle with the aftermath of a tragedy. As their relationship with one another, as well as with family and colleagues, begins to deteriorate due to the grief they are stumbling their way through, the film slips into occult territory and the weirdness escalates, culminating in a finale that may not be so much unexpected as it is surreal.

With Juliette overwhelmed by guilt and Richard becoming obsessed with his research into the area, the story examines various aspects of grief and the grieving process. Juliette's behaviour sees her spiralling away from reality and grasping at the occult for answers, while Richard's obsession with work and family history proves to be equally damaging.

Thus, the horror we are faced with in *Starve Acre* is not focused on shocking moments and scary visuals, and to some extent this means the film plays more like a supernatural thriller, where the horror is not so much in the few startles the film has to offer, but rather in exploring how our most primal emotions can play tricks on us and make us detach from reality with varying consequences.

The film moves along at a deliberate pace, something that won't be to everyone's liking, but it nonetheless feels fitting for a film preoccupied with examining the delicate nuances of the grieving process. Matt Smith and Morfydd Clark both deliver strong performances, with Smith's unravelling through obsession being particularly compelling thanks to the spectrum of emotional nuances he uses to convey to the viewer just how haunted Richard is. By comparison, Clark's performance is somewhat more subdued, but this is not to say that it's any less meaningful, as she is extremely skilful at portraying the delicate shades of feeling the part calls for.

The setting is dark and moody, which not only presents the English countryside as an unwelcoming and unsettling place where dreadful things are waiting to happen, but also underlines the dark shadow that loss casts over the young couple, serving as a manifestation of how despair and darkness are gradually taking over their lives.

With grief and trauma being favourite themes of contemporary folk horror, *Starve Acre* does not break much new ground per se, but the film nonetheless successfully creates an oppressive, brooding and visually unnerving setting, and this atmosphere serves as a fitting backdrop for Smith and Clark's intelligent performances, making it recommended viewing for those who enjoy surreal slow burns.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★☆☆

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

A couple deal with grief while a killer stalks the streets

There's a scene in *Sting* (on digital platforms) where a mutant spider paralyses a woman, climbs into her mouth, burrows down her throat, and then cuts its way out of her stomach... all while she's fully conscious. I cheered at this point. If you're similarly deranged, you'll enjoy this throwback monster movie about a young girl secretly raising an extraterrestrial arachnid. The spider starts small and almost cute, but with every cockroach meal, it grows to the size of a corner couch. Turns out that I find a spider that takes up your entire dining room table somehow more distressing than a giant spider stomping down buildings.

Since the action correlates with the size of the spider, the first half drags a bit; but once the outsized arachnid starts snatching babies and slashing bellies, things become tense and gripping. Among a mediocre cast, Alya Browne shines as the troubled teen – and that's not just because the young actress used to keep a jumping spider as a pet in real life. She gives a rich and touching performance with shades of Elliot and (a slightly more bloodthirsty) E.T.

Next, we sail to Venice for a haunting early Seventies thriller about a couple dealing with grief, all while a deranged killer stalks the pretty streets. No, not *Don't Look Now*. It's *Who Saw Her Die?* George Lazenby filmed this soon after he turned down a second James Bond. This was after his agent advised that 007 would become archaic in the hip 1970s. Oops. Maybe that's why he's so damn convincing as the grief-stricken father – he really feels sad and haunted. The cinematography is stunning, the tone is sombre and the pace is much slower than other giallos. Dare I say the violence is a little too restrained? If you're not Alan Turing, you may get confused by the plot or bummed out by the relentless sense of despair, but if you want a mature and thought-provoking Venice chiller that doesn't star Donald Sutherland, it's worth a watch, especially with the new Blu-ray from Shameless, which has some excellent interviews with the filmmakers.

Venetian killers and giant spiders are no match for our final villain, however: Satan himself, whose presence fuels Osgood (son of Anthony) Perkins's oppressive and effecting *Longlegs* (in cinemas). Nicolas Cage is frankly nuts as the titular killer, who has developed the ability to murder without being on the premises. Comparisons to *Silence of the Lambs* are thematically reasonable (to a point), but it's hardly as solid. Yet the horrors of *Longlegs* are more far-reaching. Some viewers will call the film daft and convoluted. The couple next to me walked out halfway through. Yet on the drive home from the cinema, my wife said she felt "unsafe". I knew what she meant. Quite the accolade for a movie, I'd say.

cyclingelectric DEMO DAY 2024

Thinking of buying an e-bike?

Come and ride with us at the Odd Down Cycle Track, Bath

It's your chance to try out a wide range of e-bikes from some the world's top brands, including Riese & Müller, Estarli, Tenways, Benno, Tern, Velo de Ville, Eovolt and many more TBC. It all takes place at the traffic-free, purpose-built Odd Down Cycle Track, Bath, and you'll be able to test ride commuter bikes, cargo bikes, folding bikes and more to find the right e-bike for you.

What: *Cycling Electric* Demo Day **- Where:** Odd Down Cycle Track, Bath
When: 29th September 2024, 10am - 4pm
How much: Tickets: Single - £10, Couple £15
More info: bathdemoday24.eventbrite.com

RIESE & MÜLLER tern benno VELO DE VILLE TENWAYS estarli eovolt and many more TBC

LETTERS

CONTACT US BY POST: PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE CT1 9RH, OR E-MAIL SIEVEKING@FORTEANTIMES.COM
PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH YOUR POSTAL ADDRESS

Not to worry – yet

SD Tucker's piece on Moloch and the future of AI [**FT447:38**] was immensely entertaining, but I do think fears of an artificial intelligence (AI) driven apocalypse are (at least at the moment) somewhat exaggerated. When I am not looking after the FT news pages I work for a tech startup that has some involvement with AI, and I find that while the current AI systems are impressive in what they do, what they do is mostly smoke and mirrors and a long way from becoming an intelligence that could bring us all to ruin. Current AI does not think, and it is difficult to see how it could ever develop into something that does. It is essentially a very sophisticated version of the function in writing programmes that predicts the word you might want to put next, using massive databases to extrapolate either answers or images from your prompts. It does not actually know or create anything. It also gets the massive databases it uses from scraping content from the Internet, so it is limited by what can be found there. This means that as AI is being increasingly used to generate online content, it is becoming increasingly likely that things like ChatGPT will end up as an ouroboros of incoherence just recycling previous AI generated text. As a result, AI is far more likely to eat itself than destroy humanity. Beyond that there is the issue of energy use. Data centres are already very energy-hungry, and it is estimated that each ChatGPT query uses 15 times the energy used for a Google search, so even if world domination were potentially possible, AI would be likely to run up against hard energy limits long before it is achieved. Then there are the chip manufacture and supply issues... I think we can sleep easy in our beds for a while yet.

Ian Simmons
By email

Hoggie and Nazis

While AI generating cryptids might be on the rise, you might think asking for sea monsters would be easy (Hoaxing Hoggie, **FT447:22**). Sadly, AI not only manages to get the number of fingers and toes wrong, it looks like dentition is problematic. After all, the Hoggie in the picture seems to have its right row of teeth uselessly on the outside of its mouth.

• In the report concerning the Polish digs at the Wolf's Lair [**FT447:24-25**] I was somewhat bemused by the phrase "[...] other everyday items of Nazi life, but in February their investigations took a darker, unexpected, turn." Isn't the whole subject of the Nazi regime, especially in its closing stages, somewhat... er... dark? Macabre, possibly. Mysterious, certainly. But darker than unearthing evidence of normality in an abnormal regime?

Alan Cassady-Bishop
Bridlington, Yorkshire

SIMULACRA CORNER

Dan Griffin noticed this stone head on Dartmoor and was put in mind of Judge Dredd.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Buffy versus Moloch

SD Tucker's recent article on the rise of AI and it being used as a vehicle by a destructive ancient deity [**FT447:38-43**] was fascinating and thought-provoking. As well as the connections to literature and video games that were discussed in the article itself, I was reminded of another pop culture touchstone that not only tackled similar themes but even featured the same protagonist.

A very early episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, rather clumsily titled "I Robot, You Jane", also features a creature called Moloch infiltrating what was, at the time (mid-1990s), modern technology with the aim of enslaving humanity. The basic plot of the episode runs thus: a group of monks use a magical ritual to bind Moloch (in this case a demon, rather than a child-devouring chaos god) to a magical text. Fast forward a few hundred years and, by way of plot convenience syndrome, said ancient tome has made its way into the Sunnydale High School library where it is due to be digitally scanned. Doing so unleashes the demon and causes it to infiltrate the rudimentary Internet where, by way of MSN style conversations, it romances one of the central characters and effectively brainwashes not only her but several of the other students at the school. The aim of this is to persuade them to build a robot body as a vessel for the disembodied demon, nicknamed 'The Corruptor', to allow it to once again take on physical form and wreak havoc.

Luckily, through more magical chicanery, and more by accident than by design, the creature is eventually bound to the robot body and blown to smithereens, breaking its hold over its slaves in the process. If nothing else, this does provide hope that we would hopefully be smart enough to prevent such an uprising if ancient evil and modern technology were to ever intertwine.

Whilst very much a product of its time, the episode sprang to mind almost immediately when I saw the name Moloch in Tucker's article. One does wonder whether the writers and producers of the show were already aware of the existence of Moloch in mythology before the conception of the episode or whether this is another of those coincidences where art unintentionally foreshadows life. The fact that the mention of the name still triggers a memory of the episode, particularly as it hasn't aged that well and is by no means one of the strongest throughout the series' run, also has me concerned that I have already been primed for the inevitable annihilation, at any moment, by a particularly world-weary chat-bot.

I'm off to ask the dolphins.

Aaron Bulley
By email

LETTERS

Devil's advocate

The recent unveiling of the new painting of King Charles has caused quite a stir on social media. Not being the traditional representation of the monarch, but almost a depiction in scarlet with a symbolic butterfly. When the painting is mirrored and reversed, one can view a Baphomet-like image. What are we to make of that?

In 1954 the Bank of Canada issued a one dollar note, with the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth portrait on it. It wasn't long before it was noticed that the engraving of the Queen had a devil-like face with horns woven into her hair, on her left side.

Ronnie Knight *By email*

The Dancing Stick

Part One of Ryan Shirlaw's re-assessment of TV series *Arthur C Clarke's World of Strange Powers* [**FT432:39** briefly mentions the dancing walking stick in Barnsley that tapped out tunes such as 'Jingle Bells'. If you have the series on DVD (it is also currently available on YouTube), it appears 10 minutes into Episode 2.

I also read a chapter about the case in Len Markham's book *Ten Yorkshire Mysteries* (Countryside Books, 1995, pp71-83). I wrote an article about this for UK website *The Skeptic* (Google search: The Curious Dancing Stick, *The Skeptic*), and in October 2023, I received an email from Michael Collindridge, the teenager (and amateur conjuror) at the centre of it all, who wrote: *"CURIOUS DANCING STICK ARTICLE*

I have just read your article in The Skeptic *from December 2022 – and enjoyed reading, and remembering, all the details. I only came across it after someone asked me on Facebook for more details of the stick. It is strange how people still remember the Dancing Stick after all these years – it is nearly 60 years ago! Although at the time – and [me] only 14 years old – it did cause quite a stir in Barnsley.*

The chapter Len Markham did in his Yorkshire Mysteries *book (1995) caused a renewed interest. Sadly I lost touch with Len after he moved a couple of times. I know he had started a film script on the story. And every so often I get Facebook questions on the story."*

I asked Michael if he would answer some questions on the case, and his replies are given below:

"**ME:** What is your theory on why it all happened?

MICHAEL: Not sure – I've never really offered theories of 'what and why' – just got on with it, after it all started. It was scary to begin with, but that could have been the temperature and tonsilitis??

ME: Can you remember how long it all lasted? And when was the last time the stick performed?

MICHAEL: It continued for a few months or so – and after we moved from The Cranberry (October 1966) it 'danced' on and off for a couple of months, until my mother insisted it be put in the loft or garage.

ME: The magazine *Fortean Times* did an article recently about the TV series *Arthur C Clarke's World of Strange Powers* and it mentioned [the episode] with your experiences, though it didn't go into much detail.

MICHAEL: Yes, filmed with Adam Hart-Davis for the Arthur C Clarke programme at The Cranberry (early 1980s). Also mentioned in the book about the series written by John Fairley and Simon Welfare.

ME: If it was a poltergeist, then it's the only case I've heard of which involved just one object.

MICHAEL: It was just the walking stick.

ME: Have you ever had any other strange experiences? And do you still have the stick?

MICHAEL: Only those associated with being a performing magician.

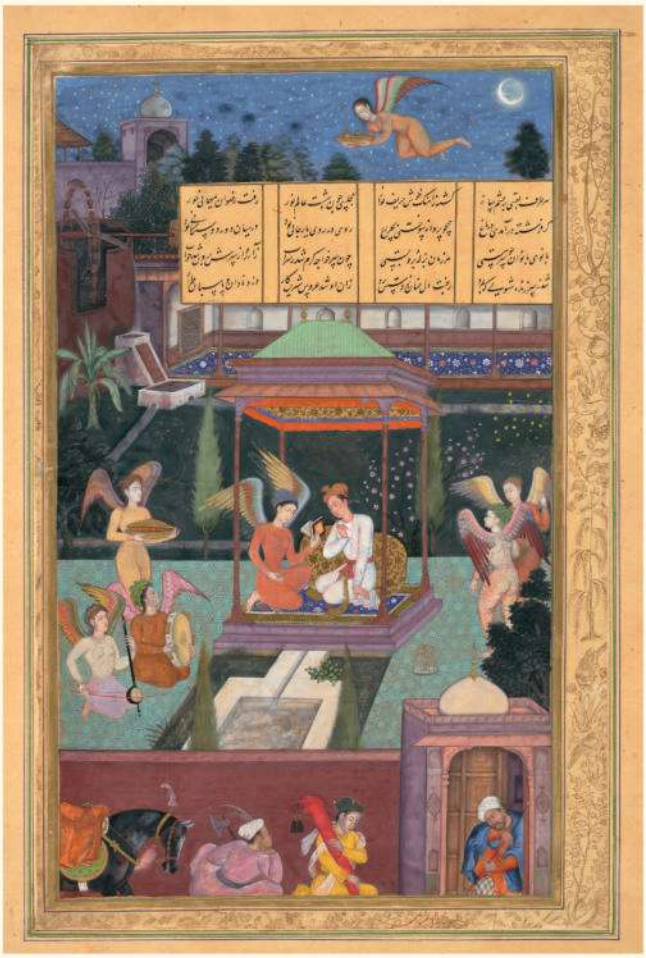
Yes, I still have the stick and all the cuttings, pictures etc.

ME: Despite my writings and investigations, I am still sceptical on the subject, but no less fascinated.

MICHAEL: That's good – the story still leaves people wondering."
Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Box performances

With regard to Georges Simenon writing in a plastic box [Myth-Conceptions, **FT430:25**], I'll tell you what definitely did happen! Will Self did actually do that, and there was a cutaway shown of him typing away in a box in an art gallery on either *Shooting Stars* or *Have I Got News for You* during one of his guest appearances. It was awesome to behold. The actress Tilda Swinton did something similar, by falling asleep in a plastic box in an art gallery, in order to eponymously constitute a "sleeping actress". Then there was the performance artist Marina Abramovic, who would sit in front of a table of random objects while the audience interacted with her. Occasionally a fan would strip off in front of her, only to find herself stopped by security. There was a gun and a bullet in amongst the objects, as if she meant to tempt fate. And when fate inevitably delivered up someone sick enough to load the gun, he was prevented from shooting her by the next man in line. David Blaine, of course, starved himself in a plastic box suspended over the Thames. Most devoted of all, though, was Damien Hirst's cow. And then there are the artists who will allow you to appreciate an empty plastic box as just an empty plastic box.
James Wright
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex



Fairy Wings

Regarding Simon Young's excellent article on fairies [**FT441:38-45**], where he stated that "the first winged fairies were only painted in the late 1700s", I can't beat Kora Drexler's classical era mosaic depicting winged beings [**FT446:61**], but nonetheless I'd like to draw your attention to "The Story of the Princess of the Blue Pavilion: The Youth of Rum Is Entertained in a Garden by a Fairy and her Maidens", painted in India by Manohar, 1597-98, and depicting winged fairies, explicitly naming them as such.
Scott Wilson *Glasgow, Scotland*

Comments on FT447

Regarding the letter 'Ancient Engineering' [p.63], I believe it is proven that the ancient Egyptians had an active quarrying industry. Although I imagine the number of blocks required for the Great Pyramid would have presented a huge challenge, I would say that their skills, experience and access to a very large labour force would have enabled them to meet the demand. And although Egypt is a hot country, its inhabitants would have been acclimatised to this, and there would have been nothing to prevent them from providing shade for the workers, at least in the quarries themselves.

• I think fairies are a more likely explanation for the mystery ring [p.62] than Johnny Cash (although I like the reference). In other words, I would suggest it was a fairy ring (toadstools or other fungus) which someone has killed off with fire, perhaps to avoid pet dogs eating it.

• "Swedish stink" [p.21] reminds me of something that once happened in an office I worked in many years ago, and may provide an explanation for some office-based occurrences. Everyone in my area began to notice the distinct smell of gas, such as that used by gas cookers, which in the UK is given a particular smell to make it detectable. Maintenance staff investigated, and were able to discover that it was in fact the smell of the fluid inside the door closer (the device that controls the closing of doors in many buildings). It had sprung a minute leak, and produced aerosolised droplets whenever the door was used, and these happened to smell like gas.
Dave Miles
By email

Testing psychic ability

Psychologist Chris French is a well-known sceptic regarding paranormal phenomena. Until his recent retirement, he headed the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit (APRU) at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His new book, *The Science of Weird Shit: Why Our Minds Conjure the Paranormal*, has received a five-star review from David Barrett [**FT447:53**].

Barrett refers to "double-blind experiments that [French] and his PhD students carefully designed to test dowsers, psychics and others", and he states – somewhat hubristically – that subjects *always* fail such tests. I don't think that's generally true in parapsychology. But if it's the rule at the APRU, maybe the place is so drenched in scepticism that it isn't very conducive to demonstrations of psi!

In early 2006, a six-part television series called *Britain's Psychic Challenge* was screened. Eight people who believed themselves to have psychic powers were put to the test. Over the course of the series, contenders were eliminated.

The eventual winner was a Welsh woman called Diane Lazarus. Chris French was a consultant to the series and was impressed by at least two of her performances (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GCYqauLhCg). In one of them, Lazarus was tasked with finding a man who was concealed under camouflage netting in an area of woodland. She did so in seven minutes, just two minutes more than a police sniffer dog. A former training instructor in the British Army was less successful – it took him 20 minutes to find the hidden man. The second test, which was conducted under the supervision of Chris French, involved a boy hidden on a beach. It took a trained search and rescue dog 36 minutes to find him. A team from the local coastguard service ran out of their allotted time after 30 minutes. But Diane Lazarus found the boy after only 10 minutes.
Peter A McCue
By email

THE SURREAL MCCOY

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

The man on the landing

In 1959, when I was four, my family moved from Preston, Lancashire, a few miles south to Leyland. Our new home was a three-bedroom terrace house a couple of hundred yards from the West Coast mainline railway. Coming in through the front door, there was a hallway with the downstairs front room and back room off from this, and a staircase leading to a landing. If you carried on straight, you had the toilet on the right and then my sister's room at the back of the house, with a window facing the backyard, and a sloping roof over the coal shed. On the right at the top of the stairs was a landing with my (and my older brother's) bedroom immediately and, further along, my parents' room. I always used to feel ill at ease on the landing.

Sometime over the next two years or so, I had a strange and terrifying dream – at least three times, I recall, over a few weeks. The landing behind me was on fire and I needed to escape. I was standing looking towards my sister's room, knowing I could get out over the coal shed. In my dream, the toilet/bathroom seemed to have disappeared and the interior wall of my sister's room was transparent. I needed to get out, but I could see that inside by the door of her room there was a small, bent old man – I thought of him as a large goblin – who exuded evil. I knew he lived on the landing. He was grinning and every time I moved towards the room to get out, he pressed a kind of latticework wooden contraption attached to the wall – the sort of thing that in old films/cartoons would have a boxing glove attached at the end. At the end of this, though, was a green, gangrenous, rotting hand with fingers outstretched. When he pressed this I sensed I could not go forward. He would laugh when he pressed it, though I do not recall hearing this. He'd do this a couple of times and then I would wake up. I don't think I told anyone about this dream – I was afraid of the man finding out.

We moved from the house in 1967. By 1982 or thereabouts I was living and working in London, coming up every few months to see my parents. On one visit, we were sitting in the pub on a Saturday night, when my mother said, "Oh, I saw Mrs. G... who used to live next door to us [when we lived at the aforementioned house]. She said a funny thing – she asked if we ever saw the ghost". When I said "No, I'd never heard of that", she said it was the ghost of an old man who appeared on the landing". Needless to say, a shiver ran down my back!

Norman Darwen
Bolton, Lancashire

Up on the ceiling

On 28 September 2005, my neighbour in King Street, Norwich, experienced a few difficulties with her boyfriend and asked if she could, with her two-year-old daughter, stay at my house, as she was afraid to go home. Her daughter is one of those most rare of breeds: she sleeps when she is asked to, is cheerful, bright, doesn't cry or whinge, and loves sleeping on her own, in the dark etc. Her mother and I took her to bed, in the room that I have on a number of occasions experienced troubles. Initially she was fine, but then she kept asking who the man was and pointing above herself at the ceiling. She would not settle, so I took her into another room and within seconds she was asleep.

> "She said he had red eyes. She seemed afraid of him and unable to settle"

Later on, unfortunately about 4am in the morning, the violent boyfriend that my mate was hiding from decided to start causing a commotion outside my house. I took her daughter into my room with me so that she would be less affected by the situation. At this point the little girl started talking about the man in my room, on the ceiling again. She said he had red eyes. She seemed afraid of him and was unable to settle. She was not disturbed by the noise outside as my room is in a different part of the building. She was clingy and was crying, which is unlike her.

Lynsey Drewitt
Norwich, Norfolk

It was interesting to hear of Alan Murdie's grandmother's experience of an OOBE (out-of-body experience) in the dentist's chair [**FT439:18**], as my first OOBE experience occurred in a similar way. Aged 14, I was in the dentist's chair and he was drilling a tooth, without anæsthetic. It was getting steadily more painful, till suddenly there I was up on the ceiling looking down on myself with this contraption in my mouth, but – crucially – completely pain-free. And there I stayed till he switched off the drill, and I popped back into my body, achey but manageable.

It didn't take away my fear of death, but it did let me know there were other aspects to consciousness. My dad picked me up afterwards, and I told him about it. "Oh really, son? That's odd". And that was all he ever had to say about it, and I was left thinking that maybe out-of-body experiences weren't that big a thing after all...

John Billingsley
Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire

Still dreaming?

Two years after my mum's death in 2007, I had been to work and gone into town straight from work to do some clothes shopping. It was late opening on a Thursday evening.

My mum and I used to speak to each other every day, ringing each other at 9pm.

When I got home from my shopping trip, I fell asleep on the settee. In my dream, I had been speaking with my mum. We had been in town with each other and as we said goodbye, she said, "I'll ring you when you get home."

The next thing the telephone rang and I got up from the settee and looked at the clock. It was 9pm and it confirmed to me that

it would be Mum on the other end of the telephone.

I answered, "Hello".

"Hi, Pete here." It was my brother.

"Oh," I said, "I thought it was Mum, she said she'd ring me when I got home from town."

My brother said, "Patricia, are you alright?"

Apparently, my brother said this at least three times, because I kept saying, "I thought it was Mum, she said she would ring when I got home."

Suddenly, I could feel myself coming completely out of my sleep.

"Oh, what am I saying? Mum died." Then I felt silly. "Oh, just ignore me, I'm still half asleep and I had a dream that Mum would ring me when I got home."

Peter was relieved when I had come to. He thought I was having a stroke. He said if I hadn't come out of it, he was going to come to the flat to make sure I was alright.

The incident actually highlighted something that had been happening to me for years. Strange things happened – for example, once, I looked at my left arm one night and it had a huge white triangle, circle and square on it. I kept trying to rub it away and it wouldn't go. I couldn't make head nor tail of it. Eventually, it faded away, but it left me puzzled for years.

Another time, I had been Thursday night shopping and bought a light blue summer jacket. It was spotless. I hung it in the bedroom. When I went back to look at it, there was a huge stain on the front of it. Not just a stain, when I felt it, it felt as if it were totally ingrained and hard. I couldn't believe it. How had I not noticed that? I even rang the shop and told them that I was going to take it back. After I rang the shop, I went back to look at the jacket again, and the stain had gone. I felt the part where the stain had been, and it wasn't there. It wasn't hard, it was soft and blue again. The stain had totally vanished. What?

After the incident with my brother ringing up and I was saying I was waiting for my mum to ring, then realising that I was still half asleep after having a nap on the settee; I realised that the connection between all these events was that I had been sleeping beforehand.

Although I was moving about and talking, I was still half asleep. I was relieved, as I thought I was going mad, but the experiences were so real, there does seem to be another reality that we don't always see.

Tricia Levack
Kirkcaldy, Fife

"Our gazes met for a moment before the cat quite literally disappeared"

A vision in Bramhall

My family and I lived in a half-timbered house in Bramhall, not far from Bramhall Hall in Cheshire. It was a house that scared me for no particular reason; it was actually lovely.

My sister and I shared a bedroom at the front, upstairs. One night in about 1967 I awoke to see a tall, multicoloured shape leaning over her. The colours were quite washed out, and slightly shimmery. It was about six feet [1.8m] high, and silent as it moved behind the foot of her bed. It must have noticed my movement because it turned to me, then disappeared.

I was very little and unaware of hauntings; but it rendered me incapable of going upstairs on my own, and indeed I'm afraid I wet my bed rather than go to the toilet down the narrow stairs.

We left a few years later, and since then I have researched this house. I contacted the Bramhall community site online and learned that the house is unoccupied and that locals have seen a face in the front window – our old bedroom.

By the way, the doors sometimes opened on their own. My father made the supposed ghost easier to manage by giving it a name: Cyril.

My brother's bedroom had a niche, where someone had put two mirrors opposite each other. I've since read that this is not a good idea and can create a portal.

Kay Allen-Prout
By email

Tabby seen twice

I've seen it twice now, the cat, a narrow tabby, whose eyes might be yellow or green; a tall torso as opposed to the round, plump one of most pet cats, though its narrowness may only be a sign of malnourishment; an alley cat, or a normal cat viewed slightly askew (anamorphic?)

I saw it first one afternoon in a flat I shared with my mother in Saffron Walden, Essex. I came out of my bedroom at the end of the corridor, the open lounge door to my right, spilling light across the carpet, across a tabby that was standing staring – looking me in the eye. Without paying much attention, I said "Hello Bunny" (a pet tabby we had at the time), but on entering the front room found her fast asleep. Baffled, I asked Mum how long she'd been there, and was told "some time"; and on retracing my steps could find no sign of an invading moggy. I was sure it wasn't my imagination, and put it down to being "one of those things".

I left Saffron Walden in 2001, and lived at three successive addresses, one in Suffolk and two in Kent, before in 2016 arriving at my current flat on the outskirts of Maidstone. I'd not seen the cat since that day in the late 1990s and assumed it was a one-off – perhaps my imagination after all – when I saw my feline friend again. As at Saffron Walden, the flat is basically a central corridor with rooms to either side, and once again I was looking along the passage from an end room at a patch of carpet illuminated by an open door to my right. I was thinking of nothing in particular, and was intrigued rather than surprised, to find myself once more staring into the eyes of a cat. This time I noticed its fur – chocolate, rather than grey, though with normal tabby markings – mackerel, not blotch. Our gazes met for a full moment before it quite literally disappeared! I am not a cat owner, and neither does a neighbour's ever visit.

Now perhaps this is over-analysing, but it occurs to me that on both occasions I've seen it, it's been standing in a doorway, and at a spot where bright daylight has been spilling into a shadowy corridor; two examples of liminality – though whether this has any bearing I do not know. I've seen it once in Essex, and once in Kent, but no more than once at either address, and never in my three other in-between homes (whose internal layout was different; no central corridors, or no natural light). It's as though a particular geography of walls, doors and illumination is necessary for an appearance.

I think I may even have heard it, here in Maidstone, late one evening after its second visit; a questioning meow from the open bedroom door – the same doorway I saw it in earlier. But though I instantly got up and searched, there was nothing to see.

Arthur Burton
Maidstone, Kent

LETTERS

Jacobus van Dyn

Reading Ronnie Knight's letter about his memories of the Scala cinema in King's Cross, London [**FT446:59**] brought back a very odd memory of my own childhood. I was born at King's Cross in 1973, and brought up just east of there, near The Angel and Chapel Market. I too remember seeing the very tattooed Jacobus van Dyn. I must have been very young, perhaps three or four years old, but he certainly made an impression on me! I remember playground stories for the whole of my primary school years that he was planning to sell his head, which was deemed to be a curiosity as the most tattooed head known, to the highest bidder after his death.

Did he actually sell his head? I remember him as an old man, his skin weather-worn and leathery, wrinkled with age, and dark with tattoos; I would suppose he died at some point in the 1980s. I did a quick google search and found an item on the Tattoo Club of Great Britain website – which has a photo of him and seems to verify the story that he did talk about selling his head (www.tattoo.co.uk/blog/post/tattoo-facts/Van-Dyn-was-in-London-trying-to-sell-his-tattooed-head).

Tamsin Rosewell
Leek Wootton, Warwickshire

Green Glow Ghost

In "Ghostwatch: Ghosts of the Great Outdoors" [**FT444:17**], the photo of the bonfire ghost may have another explanation.

I grew up and spent a good chunk of my adult life in the north of the province of Ontario, Canada, and as such I have seen the *Aurora borealis* several times in my life. Sadly, cloud cover prevented me from seeing the recent display here in southern Ontario, but hopefully there will be other solar storms!

My point is that the image of the "green glow ghost" could possibly be, in this case because it was taken in Australia, a display of the *Aurora australis*, or southern lights. It is described as emerging "from a group of elm trees, as if sucked into the plume of smoke, shot up like a rocket into the sky along with embers in the flame." (p.17).

As I've witnessed the *Aurora* several times in my life (and even heard it once, but that can be saved for another letter), the description sounds like the Southern Lights. They will appear, fade, intensify and disappear similarly to how the witnesses describe the "green glow ghost".

Although I wasn't there to witness it, the picture does resemble the *Aurora*.

Brian Gibb
Guelph, Ontario

Calvine UFO

Regarding the Calvine UFO sighting [**FT447:4-5**], it would seem to me that the craft photographed can only be one thing: an F117 Nighthawk stealth aircraft, photographed either descending towards or climbing up from the camera. The other two aircraft are UK Sea Harriers. The reason I am so certain about this is down to the timing of the photo. The F117 was a US black project and only publicly acknowledged in 1989; the production run came to an end in 1990 by which time better computing chips enabled better designs of stealth aircraft to be made. The F117 in cross section is a characteristic triangle made of big polygons, this being the only shape that the computing kit of the 1980s could calculate multiple radar reflection angles for and still produce a flying aircraft.

Also in 1989 the Sea Harrier radar, Ferranti Blue Fox, was upgraded to the much more capable Ferranti Blue Vixen. It is certain that the RAF at that time would have wanted to know how effective Blue Vixen was on the Americans' new stealth aircraft, especially since the Cold War hadn't completely stuttered to a halt at that date. Not being complete dummies, the RAF would also have been flying at least one more Sea Harrier to see what happened when a stealth aircraft is illuminated by one radar but observed by another one from a different angle, since stealth works mostly by preventing direct retro-reflection of radar back to the emitter. All of this would need to be conducted somewhere electronically quiet, away from prying eyes and within range of a military airfield.

Interestingly, this line of research on radar reflections was later pursued by the Roke Manor researchers who found that cell phone masts create enough general radiation that stealth aircraft are easily visible due to the reflections of cellphone transmitters from them. This would not have been the case in 1990, since the definition for 2G was only published in 1991, and cellphone systems preceding 2G were rare beasts indeed, especially in rural Scotland.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lockheed_F-117_Nighthawk

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:F117_Schematics.jpg

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Vixen

https://www.key.aero/forum/modern-military-aviation/48457-stealth-detection-systems

Dr Dan Holdsworth
By email

Grovely Wood Witch Trees

I was interested to see Alan Murdie's "Troublesome Stones" [**FT446:18**] about *Stigma* and its theme of burying witches under markers, pointing out the antiquity and persistence of this belief.

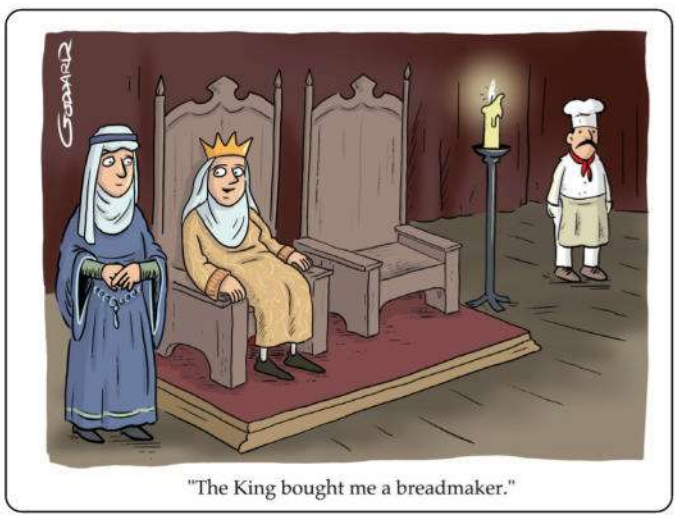
My brother David is currently researching the 'Four Sisters Witch Trees' in Grovely Wood near Wilton, Wiltshire. Any Google search will bring up numerous accounts, but briefly there are three (originally four) very old beech trees of enormous size and twisted form in a line in Grovely Wood standing out (admittedly) anomalously within a much more modern plantation of conifers. The story goes that Wiltshire folklore relates that they mark the graves of four sisters lynched as witches in 1737, two years after the 1735 Witchcraft Act abolished the belief in actual witches.

Thanks to modern social media, this tale, with minor variations, has gone viral, and the trees are now a pilgrimage site for Wiccans, Pagans, New Agers, Mediums, Ghost Tours and 'Most Haunted' articles. They are hung with ribbons, mandalas, pentagrams, offerings and trinkets including a Mars Bar and a Coke can.

Unfortunately, we and Wiltshire Records Office are unable to find this 'Wiltshire Folktale' in any folktale collection, and the earliest hit on Google for the story appears to be 2009. My opinion is that the trees have been left because they mark the boundary along Grimms Ditch between the villages of Wishford and Barford, important in mediæval times as the two villages had different Commoner's Rights within the wood. There *is* a plantation within the wood called 'Four Sisters' but it is over a mile from the beech trees, so even if the witch lynching story is true it's probably become attached to some blameless trees.

We would be most grateful if any reader can pinpoint the origin or substantiate the existence of the story, prior to say 2000.

Roger J Morgan
London



CLIVE GODDARD

READER INFO

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

UK: DD Subscription 6 issues £27.95, 1 year 13 issues £55.95; Europe/USA/CAN, 1 year 13 issues £66.95/ROW £70.95. Please see house ads in the latest issue for details of special offers.

UK, EUROPE, NORTH AMERICA & REST OF WORLD

Major credit cards accepted. Cheques or money orders should be in sterling, preferably drawn on a London bank and made payable to Diamond Publishing Limited. Mail to: **Fortean Times**, Diamond Publishing Limited, 4th Floor, Harmsworth House, 13–15 Bouverie Street, London EC4Y 8DP. NB: This address should be used for orders and subscriptions only.

Telephone payments and queries: +44 (0) 208 752 8195.
E-mail payments and queries: hello@metropolis.co.uk

HOW TO SUBMIT

Fortean Times reserves all rights to reuse material submitted by *FT* readers and contributors in any medium or format.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Contact the art director by email (etienne@forteantimes.com) before sending samples of work. We cannot guarantee to respond to unsolicited work, though every effort will be made to do so.

ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS

Please send all submissions or ideas for articles to David Sutton, Editor, Fortean Times by email: drsutton@forteantimes.com. As we receive a large volume of submissions, a decision may not be immediate.

LETTERS

Letters of comment or about experiences are welcome. Send to PO Box 1200, Whitstable, CT1 9RH, UK or email sieveking@forteantimes.com. We reserve the right to edit submissions.

BOOKS, PERIODICALS AND REVIEW MATERIAL

Contact the reviews editor at: dvbarrett@forteantimes.com

CAVEAT

FT aims to present the widest range of interpretations to stimulate discussion and welcomes helpful criticism. The opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the editors. *FT* can take no responsibility for submissions, but will take all reasonable care of material in its possession. Requests for return of material should be accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope or an International Reply Coupon.

We occasionally use material that has been placed in the public domain. It is not always possible to identify the copyright holder. If you claim credit for something we've published, we'll be pleased to make acknowledgement.

CLIPSTERS WANTED

Regular clipsters have provided the lifeblood of *Fortean Times* since it began in 1973. One of the delights for the editors is receiving packets of clips from Borneo or Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Siberia. We invite you to join in the fun and send in anything weird, from trade journals, local newspapers, extracts from obscure tomes, or library newspaper archives.

To minimise the time spent on preparing clippings for a Fort Sort, we ask that you cut them out and not fold them too small. Mark each clip (on the front, where possible) with the source, date and your name, so that we can credit you in the listing (right) when we use the material. For UK local and overseas clips, please give the town of publication. For foreign language clips, we appreciate brief translations. To avoid confusion over day and month, please write the date in this form: 1 SEPT 2024. If you send photocopies, copy on one side of the paper only.

Mail to: Fortean Times, PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE, CT1 9RH
E-mail: news@forteantimes.com

WHY *FORTEAN*?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS

AUSTRALIA Graham Cordon (SA), Tony Healy (ACT), John Palazzi (NSW), Len Watson (Qld). **CANADA** Brian Chapman (BC), Graham Conway (BC). **CYBERSPACE** John F Callahan, Hugh Henry, Steve Scanlon, Janet Wilson. **ENGLAND** Gail-Nina Anderson, Louise Bath, James Beckett, Claire Blamey, Peter Christie, Mat Coward, Kate Eccles, Paul Farthing, George Featherston, Paul Gallagher, Alan Gardiner, Keith George, Anne Hardwick, Richard Lowke, Diana Lyons, Dave Malin, Nick Maloret, Tom Ruffles, Meryl Santis, Paul Screeton, Gary Stocker, Roman Suchyj, Frank Thomas, Paul Thomas, Owen Whiteoak, Bobby Zodiac. **FRANCE** Michel Meurger. **GERMANY** Ulrich Magin. **IRELAND** Andy Conlon, Pat Corcoran. **ISRAEL** Zvi Ron. **NEW ZEALAND** Peter Hassall. **SCOTLAND** Roger Musson. **SWEDEN** Sven Rosén. **THAILAND** Terry W Colvin. **USA** Loren Coleman (ME), Jim Conlan (CT), Myron Hoyt (ME), Greg May (FL), Jim Riecken (NY), Joseph Trainor (MA), Jeffrey Vallance (CA).

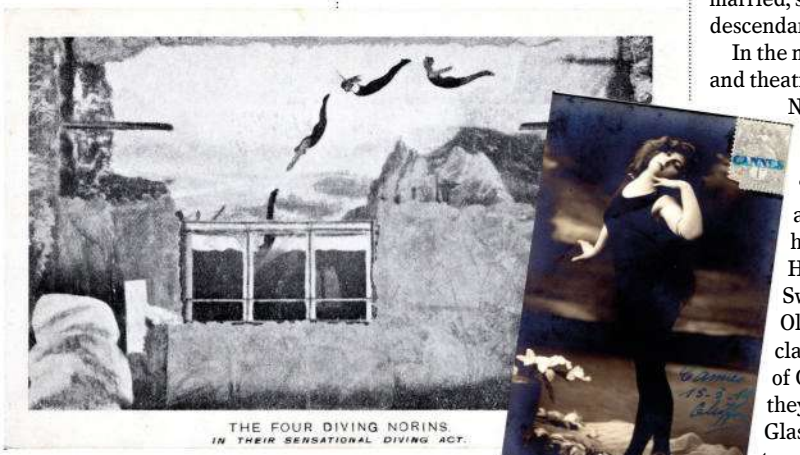
CLIPPING CREDITS FOR FT449

Daina Almario-Kopp, Gerard Apps, David C Barrett, Louise Bath, James Beckett, Lionel Beer, Kay Coggin, Terry Colvin, Andy Conlon, Pat Corcoran, Evil Vicks, George Featherston, Rob Gandy, Alan Gardiner, Keith George, Richard George, Jenny Green, Benjamin Gleisser, Hugh Henry, Nigel Herwin, Ernest Jackson, Tony James, Dr EC Krupp, Chris Josiffe, Robin Lee, Dave Malin, Nick Maloret, Lorna Stroup Nilsson, Andy Owens, Jim Price, Steve Scanlon, Ryan Shirlow, Tony Smith, Gil Sprow, Paul Screeton, Brett Taylor, Len Watson, Owen Whiteoak, James Wright, Janet Wilson.

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past explores the slightly surreal and surprisingly racy world of Swedish diving acts

46. SERENE NORD, THE DIVING VENUS



BELOW: Serene Nord: a postcard stamped and posted in France. The Frenchman who sent the card clearly fancied Serene, describing her as "cette jolie femme" on the back. **LEFT:** The Four Diving Norins mysteriously shown as an all-female troupe on a postcard with the inscription 'Jan. 1917'. And indeed, a press-cutting from March 1916 also speaks of a 'quartette of Lady Divers'. **BELOW LEFT:** The Norins in action.

Siri Stiegler was a young Swedish lass, who showed great aquatic prowess at an early age. She started swimming at the age of five, and turned to diving two years later, being coached by her brother. In 1902, at the age of just 14, she turned up in Los Angeles with a diving show, having been invited by the Swedish professional swimmer Oscar Norin, who had made a career of jumping from tall platforms, 120 feet [37m] over a shallow tank of water. Serene Nord, as Siri called herself in her professional career, became very successful, and was the world's champion female diver, with a jump of 97 feet [30m]. As she grew up, she became quite beautiful, with luxuriant fair hair, being called the 'Diving Venus' or the 'Perfect Naiad'. The lustful Americans lined up outside the swimming show to see her sporting in the water tank, wearing a tight black bathing costume.

In early 1910, Serene travelled to Liverpool, Edinburgh and London. Disowning her true Scandinavian origins, she described herself as a Californian girl when interviewed by the journalists. She was careful not to mention that at some stage of her Transatlantic career she had married a certain Joseph Alfred Norin, presumably a relation of her manager Oscar. The Diving Venus was advertised in the same sexist manner as before: the newspapers published racy accounts of her exploits, and several postcards were printed showing her in provocative poses. In a long article about her in the *Strand* magazine of 1910, she told further 'porkies' about her past life, claiming to have been born in England (untrue) but raised in Sweden, where she used to frolic in the cold Nordic waves. Serene attributed her good health, shapely figure and glowing complexion to her mastery of swimming and diving, she told the admiring journalist. In Nottingham, where she was a great success, she again described herself as an English girl.

At some stage of her career, Serene found the time to give birth to three healthy children, the existence of whom was strictly kept secret, as was the fact that she was married, to give the impression that she was 'available' to her many male admirers. When interviewed by the *Sketch* in 1910, Serene truthfully claimed to have grown up in Sweden, before travelling to the US where she performed stunts diving off tall bridges to advertise her prowess, as well as taking part in long-distance swimming races. "If, unlike Venus Aphrodite, Miss Serene Nord was not born from the sea, she was born for it!" exclaimed the susceptible journalist. The Diving Venus was fond of writing articles about her exploits for various periodicals: "Diving made Easy" appeared in the *Daily Post*, "Bathing for Beauty" in the *Royal Magazine* and "Swim and be Healthy" in *Pearson's Weekly*. In early 1912, she was performing in Portsmouth, before going on to the Grand Theatre, Hanley, and to the Burnley Palace & Hippodrome. In January 1913, she was at the Empire Theatre in Preston, being joined by two other diving girls. There have been Internet bruits that she also visited Paris and Berlin, and that in June 1913 she went to Durban in South Africa. According to online genealogical records, Mrs Siri Norin died in 1971 at the age of 83, her husband having predeceased her. Her son Gustaf married and had issue, and her two daughters also married, so she is likely to have descendants alive today.

In the meantime, the diver and theatrical manager Oscar Norin had not been idle: in 1911, he inaugurated the 'Four Diving Norins': a troupe including himself, his brother Hjalmar, and two young Swedish girls named Olga and Agnes, who claimed to be relations of Oscar. In June 1912, they were a success at the Glasgow Coliseum, before travelling on to Aberdeen. They were at the Empire Palace Theatre, Edinburgh, in early July 1912. A writer in the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* thought that "The young ladies make a particularly fine appearance in their black silk bathing costumes." And indeed, pretty young Olga usurped the mantle of Serene Nord, becoming known as 'The Perfect Woman': "A combination of beauty, grace, and daring. The Champion Diver and Fancy Swimmer of the World. Appearing at the Empire Theatre, Sheffield, this week." The war years put an end to the activities of the Four Diving Norins. Hjalmar went back to Sweden, where he married and settled down in Stockholm; the fates of his much-travelled brother Oscar and the female 'Norins' have not been recorded.

PHENOMENOMIX

TINAMOU

HUNT EMERSON

HELLO! I'M IN THE DEEPEST FOREST OF COLOMBIA, LOOKING FOR A MAGDALENA TINAMOU!
IT'S A FLIGHTLESS BIRD THAT WAS EXTINCT SINCE 1814, UNTIL A FEW WERE SPOTTED IN 2023...
SO, THEY'VE SENT ME OUT HERE TO SEE IF I CAN SPOT ONE FOR FORTEAN TIMES!
I DON'T EXPECT TO SEE ANY... IT MUST BE A VERY SHY BIRD...
I MEAN, IF IT KEPT TO ITSELF FOR 200 YEARS, IT'S NOT LIKELY TO JUST POP OUT NOW, JUST COS I'M HERE!
NO - IT'LL STAY HIDDEN FOR ANOTHER 200 YEARS, GIVEN THE OPTION...
I'VE HAD ENOUGH... I GIVE IN! I'M GOING HOME...
PITY, THOUGH... WE'D HAVE GIVEN THE TINAMOU A FRONT COVER FEATURE, GOT IT ONTO TV NEWS... MAYBE LEAD TO FILM OFFERS... IT COULD HAVE BEEN A CELEB... TOO BAD...

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE WOMEN IN WHITE

IN SEARCH OF PHANTOM LADIES

THE WIZARD OF DUNGENESS

MAGIC AND MYSTERY IN DEREK JARMAN'S GARDEN

+ Pay-per view séance, Sun cycles and unrest, Whittling weirdness, and much more...

FORTEAN TIMES 450
ON SALE 3 OCT 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

After a farming couple in their 80s living in Waitakere, near Auckland, New Zealand, had not contacted relatives for several days, their son went to investigate. He found the couple dead in a sheep paddock, apparently having been killed by one of the animals. Police believe a ram was responsible for their deaths as when they attempted to retrieve the bodies it reportedly "confronted" them and they were forced to shoot the animal to be able to gain access to the field. It is thought the man had gone to the paddock to check on the animals and had been attacked and killed by the ram, and that his wife met with a similar fate when she went to look for him. Animal behaviourist Mark Vette said it was not unusual for rams to attack, but it was rare for them to kill anybody. "Most people who have farmed at some stage would have had a ram that you've got to be careful of. If you turn your back on them, they'll have a bit of a crack at you at times," he said, adding, however, that it "would be a very rare occasion for a ram to injure someone to that level." *dailymail.co.uk, 5 Apr 2024.*

The eighth Marquess of Ailesbury, Michael Brudenell-Bruce, 98, died after falling from the bedroom window of his London house while attempting to let his cat out. His partner Teresa Marshall de Paoli, 88, said, "It was an absolutely freak accident, there had not been a row, I hadn't hit him. I think the cat called Honeybun got her head stuck and he pushed it [the window] up and lost his balance, and he fell onto to the patio." Brudenell-Bruce died instantly of head injuries. *dailymail.co.uk, 17 May 2024*.

While taking part in an extended drinking session in Labasa, in Sulawesi, Indonesia, two men, Kadir Markus, 47, and another drinker identified only as DR, 30, took to challenging each other with jokes, riddles and puzzles. However, when they got onto "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" the discussion became heated and emotional, resulting in DR threatening "to gut" Markus and storming out. He returned with a large knife and killed Markus, before surrendering to police, who arrived moments later, having been called by other drinkers. *kumparan.com, 27 Jul 2024.*

As a major thunderstorm rolled in towards Seaside Park Beach in New Jersey, Patrick Dispoto, 59, and his girlfriend Ruth Fussell retreated to their truck. Dispoto, however, spotted children still playing in the open on the beach and decided to return to warn them of the danger of being struck by lightning if they stayed there. Fussell told him, "You have no business going back," but Dispoto disagreed, saying, "I'll be right back," and returned to the beach. After 15 minutes had passed and he had not returned, Fussell went to look for Dispoto and found him unconscious. Emergency responders rushed him to hospital, but he was later pronounced dead, with cause of death given as "accidental death caused by lightning strike". Dispoto died only days before Seaside Park's scheduled installation of a lightning detection system, designed to warn beachgoers of the threat of imminent lightning strikes. *editions.cnn.com, 26 June 2024*.

Police in the Spanish resort of Magaluf discovered Michael Grant, 45, lying unresponsive in the street in the early hours of 1 July. Grant, from Waterford in Ireland, was on holiday in the popular resort with his wife and four children but became separated from his family after spending the afternoon drinking by his hotel pool, then going out partying. He was next seen by a security guard, collapsing and falling to the ground at 4.30am near the Punta Ballena strip, an area of bars and nightclubs. There were attempts to revive him, but he was declared dead at the scene. Initially it was thought that Grant had died of a heart attack, but police said, "a prior examination of his body ahead of the full autopsy has thrown up some surprises and given investigators cause for concern." Grant's body was covered in human bite marks, he had a deep wound with glass embedded in it on his back, and, the statement added: "Injuries on Mr Grant's leg are consistent with him being run over by a car, [although] they don't appear on the face of it to be life-threatening." No one had seen a car strike Grant, and an intensive search of local CCTV turned up no sign of an accident. Police were awaiting results of a full autopsy, saying, "This death does not appear to be crime-related in any way, but the autopsy will be key to determining what happens next." *thesun.co.uk, 2 Jul 2024.*

ROGER'S PROFANISAURUS

TURTLESHEAD REVISITED

BRITAIN'S FAVOURITE SWEARING DICTIONARY

—REVISED & UPDATED FOR 2024—

GROWLER
Viz presents Roger's Profanisaurus
Turtleshead Revisited
Britain's Favourite Swearing Dictionary
—Revised & Updated for 2024—
"The Roger's Profanisaurus books are some of the greatest works of British literature." Richard Osman

AVAILABLE NOW

IN ALL GOOD SHOPS AND ONLINE AT

SHOP.VIZ.CO.UK

Don't Scare Claire & Eulogy Media

PRESENT

THE GHOSTS OF EPPING FOREST

1ST OCTOBER 2024

YouTube.com/@DontScareClaire